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Understanding Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Challenging Behavior: "It's Exhausting"

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Understanding Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Challenging Behavior: "It's Exhausting"

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Approvals

In the judgment of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

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Abstract

Child maltreatment is a widespread issue across the United States, directly impacting young children's learning and behavior. Yet, variability found in early education pre-service training does not include focus on this topic. Early education teachers often experience low wages, long work hours, and a lack of support to meet the needs of young children. This mixed methods study sought to understand preschool teachers' perceptions of challenging behavior in their classrooms and the impact challenging behavior has on relationships within the classroom community. Quantitative data was collected from 30 preschool teachers using the Student-Teacher Relationship Short Form and frequency ratings of common behavior attributes. Three survey respondents participated in interviews to gather qualitative data that detail their perceptions about challenging behavior and student-teacher relationships on a deeper level. Survey results describe the student-teacher relationships as marked by closeness or conflict, these subscale scores have a moderate negative correlation. The most common behaviors found in preschool classrooms were *impulsivity, neediness, defiance, needs high levels of teacher support, talking out of turn,* and *too much energy*. Findings suggest preschool teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach children with challenging behavior, feelings of isolation influence preschool teachers' ability to teach children with challenging behavior, and when preschool teachers feel a sense of connectedness, their success and satisfaction in the classroom increases.

Keywords: challenging behavior, preschool, student-teacher relationship, teacher preparation, trauma

Dedication

To my Committee: Patricia, Sal, and Margaret; and my fourth mentor, Joe.
The respect and admiration I have for you is hard to put into words. I couldn't have done this without you, and "thank you" doesn't feel adequate for expressing how I feel but THANK YOU.
Thank you for teaching me, guiding me, pushing me, listening to me ramble about my "aha" moments, and for seeing something in me that I still haven't completely let myself see.
It was a dream to work with each of you (I still can't believe you all said yes)
and I am eternally grateful to you for sharing your time and knowledge with me.

To the Deviant Outliers. Bonded forever. We made it.

To my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Merrill, and my second-grade librarian, Mrs. Blake. Thank you for seeing seven-year-old me. Your attention made a world of difference. Without you, my life might have veered in a completely different direction.

To Olivia, and all the dandelion-loving children I have taught throughout my life…
I see you. You matter. You are the reason I do this work.
You inspire me to make a difference each time I step foot into a classroom.
I will remember you always.

To my colleague, friend, and forever rockstar, Christina.
Thank you for the countless hours of cheering, challenging, and laughter you offered me while I accomplished this crazy idea of mine.

To my dearest team of teachers turned forever friends (you know who you are),
and to all practicing and aspiring early education teachers.
You have the ability to make a huge impact in your students' lives.
You have the ability to make a strong connection with *every* child in your classroom.
Remember that on the good days, and the hard days.
And may the force always be with you.

To my friends and family members who shared words of encouragement
and support throughout this process. I appreciate all the faith and cheering you offered while seeing me to the finish line.

And to my favorite thing, Callia Mae. You have always been my biggest supporter, even when I was tired and distracted, even when you didn't quite understand my excitement or what I was talking about or how I could possibly "still be typing" late into the night –
and you danced it out with me in the kitchen anyway and said, "Mommy, you've got this."
Thank you for being you. I'm so lucky to be your mom.
I love you most.

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Chapter One: Introduction

A child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care of and in joint activity with that child. In short, somebody has to be crazy about that kid.

~ Urie Bronfenbrenner

The playground can be a place for forming lifelong friendships, sparking a new interest in unknown topics, and gaining an awareness of the world around you. However, for many young children, school can also be where they seek safety from a tumultuous home life and obtain a healthy meal to fill their empty stomachs. On the other hand, some young children count down the minutes until they can escape their classrooms due to feelings of not belonging. Early education teachers can create a safe and supportive learning environment to support children's sense of belonging and well-being.

Early educators are critical in the lives of children. They are part of a child's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), intertwined in a child's inner relationship circle and, therefore, can buffer or heighten stressors the child is experiencing (Cole et al., 2005; Li & Julian, 2012; Scaiaraffa et al., 2018). With young children often spending over 40 hours per week in early education settings, their teachers need to understand expected developmental norms, to know the signs that a child might be experiencing maltreatment, and strategies to provide a supportive learning environment for all (Chen et al., 2021; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014b; Schaack et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

During these early years, children are still developing the language skills needed to communicate with their teachers about their feelings (Westby & Robinson, 2014) and what might be causing turmoil in their lives. Children's behaviors can often be misunderstood. Children's

expressions of exclusion, abandonment, unmet needs, or cries for help can cause frustration for caregivers. Therefore, early education teachers must have the knowledge and resources to recognize young children's needs and support them in their care.

Continuity is absent within the field across the United States regarding standards for high-quality early education and the required education levels for its teachers. It is commonplace for early education teachers to be paid meager wages, have a shortage of resources, and have little support from leadership. Due to this, early education teachers often burnout within five years of entering the field (Pianta et al., 2016, p. 128).

Studies point to early education teachers' scarcity of access to professional development geared toward supporting and understanding the needs of young children (Chen et al., 2021; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014b; Post et al., 2020b; Recchia, 2012; Ruprecht, 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Literature also points out that due to their professional stressors, like lack of support from the administration, early education teachers do not feel emotionally regulated enough to educate children who are displaying challenging behavior (Chen et al. 2021; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014b; Post et al., 2020b; Recchia, 2012; Ruprecht, 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

This research study was designed to understand preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behavior in their classrooms. In the following sections, I discuss why I embarked on this topic of inquiry, my theoretical orientations, the purpose of this study, and a review of the methodology used. I describe my assumptions, validity, and significance of this study to the field of early education, as well as the definitions of terms, and outline what is to come in the following chapters.

Why This Study

I tell my story not to evoke sympathy but rather to richly define why I desire to improve the lives of young children. Like many, my childhood was a pattern of food and housing insecurity, an abusive home, and constant anxiety about having to be ready to pack up and move at a moment's notice.

I remember the school library being a safe place. It was always quiet, not too big, full of shelves and carts overflowing with books. During second grade, I spent most of my recesses in the school library, often arriving early to eat lunch with the librarian. I spent this time assisting her in keeping the shelves stocked with returned books and usually just reading quietly while I ate my lunch. My memory does not include how this arrangement came to be; my second-grade teacher seemed fond of me and friendly with the librarian. However, it happened, I was grateful.

By the time I had reached second grade, my family had moved across the southeast of Massachusetts to Cape Cod, down to and around Florida, and back through it all again. My family had lost housing on multiple occasions, had little to no money, had run-ins with the Department of Children & Families, and watched my father deal with law enforcement. My siblings and I transferred between school districts so often that I became used to being the "new kid," coming to understand that childhood promises of being "best friends forever" were fleeting. Due to my family moving around frequently, my older brother missed school so much during the first grade that he had to repeat it. My sister intermittingly attended kindergarten. As an adult, I can imagine that my second-grade teacher knew of my family troubles or perhaps realized that I preferred to keep my nose in a book over trying to make new friends with other students. Maybe that is how I ended up with the librarian. Whatever the reasons, knowing what I know now about the importance of close relationships and a secure attachment between a child and at least one

adult for healthy development, I believe those two teachers nurtured my resilience, a foundation that I would continue to lean on throughout my life.

The hardships did not end with second grade. By the end of that school year, my parents went through a highly volatile divorce, causing us to lose our housing once again, this time without a place to go. My siblings, mother, and I ended up living with strangers for a few months, which turned out to be a dangerous situation. From there, we moved again, transferred to another school district, and adjusted again to being the new kids in school. It became frequent for my siblings and me to be left with a new love interest of my mother's, strangers, or more commonly, on our own while my mother was gone for long hours at work. Somehow, through all this turmoil, my second-grade teacher and librarian stayed in touch and kept an eye on me. I would often receive postcards or small gifts from them. At one point, they drove well out of their way to take me to lunch.

By fifth grade, I transferred to a new school district for the sixth time and experienced another loss of housing and another experience of no place to go. That year, my family moved a total of three times in less than six months. During these new challenges, I lost touch with both teachers. However, the kindness and interest they showed me made me feel visible and important. Neither one of those teachers ever pressured me to share what was going on at home or join back into recess. I remember that I always appreciated the quiet, the company of them by my side, and being able to talk about whatever adventures I happened to be reading about.

The rest of my childhood was the same pattern of food and housing insecurity, an abusive home, and constant anxiety of having to be ready to pack up and move at a moment's notice. During my teen years, I experienced more chaos. My father passed away when I was 14 years old, and by the time I was 16 years old, my mother willingly placed me in foster care as I entered

a seventh school district. My siblings and I lost touch for over a year or so until I was released back to my mother for a short period of time. Shortly after returning to my mother's house, I was gone again, living between multiple friends' homes as I finished my last year of high school and trying to stay out of trouble. By senior year I had moved 15 times, give, or take, as my memory is blurry during some years. But despite how hard it was outside of school, I made it.

Throughout my school experiences, a handful of teachers were incredibly kind, often taking extra time to ask how I was, offering school supplies when I did not have any, and at one point, even offering me a couch to sleep on. I believe that had it not been for the few teachers in my life who developed a strong relationship with me and offered me genuine support when obstacles were put in my path, my life might have gone in a different direction.

Throughout my childhood, throughout my life, I have been drawn to the classroom. Whether it was as a child in pursuit of a kind face or as an adult in pursuit of reaching a challenging child, I am compelled to strive to make a difference in the lives of children growing up like me or facing far worse challenges and adversity. I attribute my success and where I am today to those teachers who believed in me enough so that I could not only survive but I could move beyond my circumstance to pursue my goals. Reflecting on my journey to reach this stage of my career and life, I can confidently say that I am resilient.

Statement of the Problem

All children must be educated in safe and supportive learning environments, as this impacts their overall wellness, learning, and future quality of life. This is especially true for children experiencing adversity (Cole et al., 2005; Felitti et al., 1998; Li & Julian, 2012; Scaiaraffa et al., 2018). Early educators are vital to creating learning ecologies of support and

healing. Unfortunately, this level of quality is not found in all early learning centers (Pianta et al., 2016).

Research has shown not all early education teachers share an understanding of the developmental impact adversity may have on young children, how to create or the benefits of a safe and supportive learning environment (Chen et al., 2021; Hemmeter et al., 2008; Schaack et al., 2020; Thomason & La Paro, 2013; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Over the last 20 years of my professional career in early education, it has become clear that there is a lack of shared understanding throughout the field of why children behave the way they do. In my professional experiences, I have witnessed young children and families labeled as problematic and challenging instead of receiving the message they belonged to, and teachers who were well-intentioned but without needed support reached the level of burnout.

We know that a safe and supportive learning milieu can buffer the effects of adversity in early childhood (Cole et al., 2005; Felitti et al., 1998; Li & Julian, 2012; Scaiaraffa et al., 2018), which one in four children experience (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], n.d.). In fact, for every U.S. dollar invested, there are three to seven dollars of economic return, such as reduced spending on special education and child protection services and an increase in adult salary earnings. Children who attend quality early education show a gain of six months to a year in academic learning and social and emotional development (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

Teachers enter the field intending to care for and educate young children, yet an early education system does not support them to do so (Chen & Phillips, 2018; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Garrity et al., 2019; Recchia, 2012; Ruprecht, 2020). With increased classroom disruption, stress, and meager wages, early education teachers quit their jobs, disrupting an opportunity for another adult attachment for young students. Leadership struggles to support this

issue due to the increasing support and funding required for early education teachers to meet their students' high needs (Chen & Phillips, 2018; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Sandilos et al., 2020; Schaack et al., 2020).

Across the U.S., varying levels of education are required to obtain an early education teaching credential (Ai et al., 2022; Pianta et al., 2016; Schaack et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). It is common for young children enrolled in U.S. early education to be taught by early education teachers who have not had the necessary education or training to support their developmental needs (Ai et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Jamil et al., 2022; Loomis, 2018; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020b; Schaack et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). This leads to early education teachers misunderstanding children's behaviors, disrupting relationships, and being unprepared to support young children who sometimes need high levels of adult support.

Entering the classroom without enough preparation can potentially harm young children and teachers. Despite the research reporting on this issue, early education teachers' voices and perspectives are still unheard (Snell et al., 2012). The field of early education must gain an understanding of early education teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviors in their classrooms. Gaining more profound insight into these perceptions will help us understand how best to support teachers, where the gaps in their training fall, and, in turn, support the young children in their classrooms and influence future practice and policy.

Theoretical Orientations

My theoretical framework lies within a relational constructivist perspective (Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 2005; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978), as I believe young children and adults learn by interacting with the world. Therefore, I approached this study design and data

analysis using this perspective. Constructivists believe one makes meaning through interaction and experience with each facet of one's identity. An individual's identity includes the family system, interpersonal relationships, profession, education, and community. In addition, relational theoretical frameworks of attachment (Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 2005) and ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 2005) emphasize and support the inquiry of understanding relationships' impact on the developing person. These frameworks support my belief system of learning about the world through experiences with family, community, society, and culture.

Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory suggests that developing persons are influenced throughout their lifespan by each experience they have with others and their surrounding environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 107). Bronfenbrenner illustrates these influences through the image of five circles nested within each other to represent the different systems people encounter when developing. Each of these systems is a connection point for a relationship to leave an impression on a person and thus shape who they are and who they become.

The *microsystem* contains the developing person and the interpersonal relationships the developing person interacts with daily (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In the context of a young child, this microsystem includes the child's immediate household members or, within an early learning center, a child's assigned classroom. The *mesosystem,* in essence, is the relationship between different microsystems that the developing person interacts with, such as the child's home and preschool (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The *exosystem* can be thought of as an indirect extension of the microsystem, for example, "for a child, the relationship between the home and the parent's workplace" (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 148). Another example to consider within the exosystem is the relationship between the child's classroom and the teacher's home environment or outside work commitments. The experiences within these settings directly influence a teacher's ability to arrive each day ready to teach young children. If a teacher is experiencing stressors outside of the classroom, those stressors may impede a teacher's ability to be fully present for their students.

The *macrosystem* can be understood to include society: the culture or subculture, opportunities, laws and regulations, access to resources, and other opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner stresses that achievement and developmental outcomes should only be considered within the context of one's culture. Normative developmental milestones may vary markedly across cultures or subcultures (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). With consideration to young children, the macrosystem can be viewed as a child's neighborhood, extended family, or faith community, the transportation they use to get to school, and individuals the child may interact with on their route, for example.

The last layer of these systems is the *chronosystem*. The chronosystem represents time and events throughout the developing person's life. For example, intergenerational events, such as being born after the COVID-19 pandemic, can impact parenting choices. This incredibly significant event may cause parents or teachers to make altered choices or interact differently with the world around them, including their children, than before the pandemic, thus influencing children's developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner believed these systems cannot be understood independently of each other; in other words, the interactions that take place in and between each person or place will affect the other, thereby changing it, referred to as a *proximal process* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). While establishing a bond between the child and the attachment figure, the adult will act as a secure base for the child to return to after exploration for co-regulation and safety. Each interaction between the child-adult dyad will influence their subsequent interaction, thus deepening their relationship, similar to the underpinnings of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner believed it is essential for those charged with caring for young children, whether policymakers or teachers, to understand how children develop within ecological systems. Throughout his teachings, Bronfenbrenner returned continuously to the relationship, whether it be between, for example, child and teacher, teacher and school, or parent and school, and how that relationship influences the other in a reciprocal nature. The more experiences children have with peers and teachers, the more influenced their development will become. In turn, the more experiences teachers have with children and other teachers, the more influenced their teaching will become. These influences can be either or both positive or negative in nature (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner suggests, as does attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 2005; Sroufe, 2005) and traumatology (Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2019; Perry et al., 1995; Perry, 2002), external experiences become internalized by the developing person, thus changing the person. That internalized information then manifests itself through interactions

the developing person engages in. Bronfenbrenner theorizes that others within the environment can act as buffers against lacking or potentially adverse experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Attachment Theory

Through John Bowlby's (Bowlby, 1982) seminal work developing attachment theory in the 1950s through the turn of the century, the fields of psychology and child development have used the groundwork of this theory to understand development and behavior found in children and adults (Bowlby, 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; Page et al., 2021). Early experiences in infancy and childhood form a person's outlook when seeking, creating, and maintaining relationships. This negative or positive outlook is shaped by the security, or lack of security, found within the relationship a person has with their primary attachment figures, typically the mother and father (Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 2005).

According to Bowlby (1982; 2005) and confirmed through Ainsworth and Bell's (1970) Strange Situation research, the basis of attachment is the behavior of seeking proximity to a chosen individual who is perceived to be stronger and sustains over time. The following are the seven characteristics of attachment theory which Bowlby (2005) described:

1. Specificity: "Attachment behaviour is directed towards one or a few specific individuals, usually in clear order of preference" (p. 154).
2. Duration: "An attachment endures, usually for a large part of the life cycle…early attachments are not easily abandoned and they commonly persist" (p. 155).
3. Engagement of emotion: "Many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation, maintenance, the disruption and the renewal of attachment relationships" (p. 155).

4. Ontogeny: "In the great majority of human infants attachment behaviour to a preferred figure develops during the first nine months of life…For this reason, whoever is principally mothering a child becomes his principal attachment figure" (p. 155).
5. Learning: "Whereas learning to distinguish familiar from the strange is a key process in the development of attachment…an attachment can develop despite repeated punishment from the attachment figure" (p. 155).
6. Organization: "Initially attachment behaviour is mediated by responses organized on fairly simple lines…Among activating conditions are strangeness, hunger, fatigue, and anything frightening. Terminating conditions include sight or sound of mother-figure, and especially, happy interaction with her" (p. 156).
7. Biological function: "Attachment behaviour occurs in the young of almost all species of mammal, and in a number of species it persists throughout adult life. Although there are many differences…maintenance of proximity by an immature animal to a preferred adult, almost always mother, is the rule, which suggests that such behaviour has survival value" (p. 156).

Conceptual Framework. Both attachment theory and ecological systems theory share keystones of the importance of relationships between young children and their parents and the reciprocal nature of interactions with the surrounding and distant environments within their world. Early learning centers are positioned within a child's microsystem, and due to that position, they have a vital role in buffering the developmental impact children experience from ongoing traumatic experiences (Sciaraffa et al., 2018). An early education teacher can be a positive and caring attachment figure to a child, which research suggests is critical for resiliency development (Li & Julian, 2012; Sciaraffa et al., 2018). Due to the impact early education

teachers can have on the developmental outcomes of young children, early learning centers should be designed to be safe, supportive, responsive to children's social and emotional needs, and understand the prevalence of trauma and adversity in young children's lives. In other words, early learning centers should be trauma-sensitive (Cole et al., 2005; Cole et al., 2013).

Cole et al. (2005) define trauma-sensitive schools as those that include policies ensuring teachers learn how to identify trauma symptoms, how trauma can impact learning, and strategies to design curricula with these impacts in mind: school-wide infrastructure and school culture that supports an environment beginning with top-down buy-in to create a safe environment for all children; building relationships with both children and families and incorporating mental health professionals into the school community. Trauma-sensitive early learning centers are thus critical to a child's ecological system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study (Leavy, 2017) was to understand better preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behaviors in their classroom and the influence of these behaviors on relationships within the classroom. Through interviews, preschool teachers could tell stories about their experiences with challenging behaviors within their early learning centers, uncover what they understand about children's behavior, how behavior impacts relationships, and what they need to be successful teachers. By participating in this research project, preschool teachers had the opportunity to add their voices to the literature.

The attention given to preschool teachers' experiences and perspectives in this study can impact the field, resulting in more young children being greeted by teachers who understand the benefits of forming a close relationship with them and are prepared to support their behaviors and development.

To examine and understand the perceptions preschool teachers hold of children's challenging behavior within their classrooms, the following guiding research questions shaped methodology and analysis:

1: What are preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behavior within their classrooms?

2: *How does challenging behavior impact relationships between children and teachers in an early learning setting?*

Methodology

This sequential mixed methods study (Leavy, 2017) was designed to understand better preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behaviors in their classrooms and how challenging behaviors may impact relationships within the classroom. The qualitative inquiry phase was designed to reflect phenomenological methods. Phenomenology aims to understand the experiences of individuals going through similar life events (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This study brings attention to the experiences of a sample of 30 preschool teachers and the phenomenon of teaching children who demonstrate challenging behaviors. I interviewed three preschool teachers aligning with phenomenology methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

I first contacted preschool teachers from licensed early learning centers with an online survey. The survey collected quantitative data regarding participants' perceived relationships with children in their classrooms. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to volunteer for an interview. The combination of the survey and interview analysis provided data to understand better participants' perceptions of challenging behavior in their classrooms.

Assumptions

Holding the professional position of teacher, coach, administrator in early education, and researcher created an unintentional power differential between myself and the participants. I entered this study with an insider status (Leavy, 2017) and was aware of how my professional experiences may influence my interpretation of the data.

I held the bias participants would not have a comprehensive understanding of trauma-sensitive teaching and learning environments. I believe this would be due to limited access to higher education and specific professional development or college courses on trauma. This assumption has grown from my decades of professional experience in early education, and I acknowledge that the data collected resulted in my beliefs and biases being dispelled. I assume that quantitative and qualitative data would be complementary and support a deeper understanding of the held perceptions of children with challenging behavior within this sample. Lastly, I used memos and member checks to support the analysis of participant perspectives, not skewed by assumptions as I moved through the study.

Validity

I have professional experience as a teacher, coach, and administrator in the field of early education, and I identify as a cisgender white female of low socioeconomic class. I acknowledge my privilege in the areas of race and education. To mitigate the limitations brought by this positionality, I bracketed held assumptions and biases (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I purposefully identified early learning centers that fall outside the regions where I live and work. This additional layer helped remove me from the participants' experiences and prevented the possibility that participants might have known me before entering the study.

I considered my insider status when designing this study. I understand how early learning centers operate, how busy they can be daily, and the typical work hours of early education teachers. With these considerations in mind, I decided using a mixed methods approach would capture preschool teachers in the highest numbers. The quantitative instrument could be completed in less than ten minutes. The preschool teachers who did not have time to participate in an interview could still contribute their voices to the study via the quantitative instrument.

Significance of Study

This study matters to the field of early education as well as to society for the welfare of our children and their futures. Preschool teachers' voices help us better understand how we can support building relationships between children and teachers in early learning centers, especially when challenging behaviors are present. The study adds to the research regarding the conditions of the early education system and the limited research regarding the experiences of preschool teachers.

This study aims to extend the slight body of literature surrounding known evidence-based intervention strategies, including preparatory programs, for preschool teachers to implement in their classrooms to support all children. In addition, this study aims to impact practice and policy directions in the field of early education teacher preparatory programs.

Definition of Terms

Many terms are used throughout theories of attachment and ecological systems, as well as in the fields of early childhood education and traumatology. While these terms refer to different types of experiences, the terms below are used interchangeably by experts in the field and throughout this study.

Abuse. Physical, sexual, and psychological harm to a child's mind or body, including the witnessing of violence against a caregiver (NCTSN, 2019).

Adversity. An adverse experience that a child goes through. These experiences may include poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, community violence, racism, and witnessing domestic violence. Four or more adverse childhood experiences have been shown to increase an individual's likelihood of engaging in risky behavior, such as sexual promiscuity or substance use, as well as suffering from health-related issues such as diabetes and heart disease (Felitti et al., 1998).

Attachment. The predisposition of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to specific others, typically the biological mother (Bowlby, 1982). Irrational attachment or "love" (Bronfenbrenner, 1973, as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Related to community and cultural values regarding family and caregiving (Rogoff, 2003).

Challenging behavior. Defiance, property destruction, aggression, withdrawal, and noncompliance (Strain & Timm, 2001).

Complex trauma. Multiple ongoing traumatic events, often in the context of coexisting emotional neglect, with the primary caretaker or family unit as the source of the threat. (NCTSN, 2019).

Developmental trauma. Traumatic experience during the period of development in utero to maturity (Ungar & Perry, 2012)

Developmental insult. Any disruption that can lead to abnormal neurodevelopment. Factors that exacerbate the effects of the developmental insult are the timing of the insult (e.g., substance use in utero, physical abuse during infancy, emotional neglect during toddler years), relationship between the child and their abuser, intensity and invasiveness, losses associated with

event (e.g., loss of caregiver), age of first traumatic experience, level of community safety, socioeconomic status, reaction the child receives if they disclose a traumatic experience, access to treatment following a traumatic experience and if the child has environmental supports (NCTSN, 2019; Perry, 2001).

Early Childhood Education or ***Early Education***. "Includes formal programs for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children during out-of-school time; group homes; foster care and adoption placement agencies; and residential schools for children with special needs; as well as programs in informal settings such as home visiting, and community-based family engagement networks" (Massachusetts Department of Early Education & Care, n.d.).

Early Education Teacher. I will use this term to describe the individuals who educate young children, from birth to five, within a formal early learning center.

Early Learning Center. I will use this term to include any formal, non-familial, non-public school setting where early childhood education occurs. This is an inclusive term to describe community-based centers, home-based, faith-based, nonprofit, or for-profit. Children who attend early learning centers are aged from birth to five years old.

Family or ***Parent.*** I will use the term "family" or "parent" interchangeably to define the many ways a family or caregiver can be connected to a child. This includes biological parents, foster parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other adults caring in the home.

Malleable. Capable of being shaped or formed…easily controlled or influenced…able to adjust to changing circumstances… adaptability (Perry, 1997).

Maltreatment. Abuse (e.g., physical, sexual) or neglect that a child experiences (Perry, 2001).

Neglect. Deprivation of critical experiences during development, including emotional, cognitive, and somatosensory experiences (Perry, 2001).

Preschool. A formal early learning center with children enrolled between the ages of 2.9 years and 5.11 years old. This could include both public school and non-public school settings.

Relational milieu or ***relational health***. A child's relational environment: how many relationships a child has in their life; the positive nature of these relationships (Perry, 2018).

Closeness (within a relational environment). A high level of warmth and affection between early education teacher and their students. In a close relationship, students view their teacher as supportive and easy to talk to (Pianta, 2001b).

Conflict (within a relational environment). A high level of negativity between early education teacher and their students. Teachers in a conflictual relationship believe their students to be angry and unpredictable and personally experience feelings of burnout (Pianta, 2001b).

Resilience. Marked by the ability to recover readily, as from misfortune, capable of returning to an original shape or position (Perry, 1997).

Trauma. Any experience that results in a child's system becoming overwhelmed and alters their physiological system and its response to ongoing or future stressors (Ungar & Perry, 2012).

Trauma-sensitive. School-wide policies ensure teachers learn how to identify signs of experiencing adversity and trauma, how trauma can impact learning, and strategies that design curricula with these impacts in mind. School-wide infrastructure and culture will support an environment beginning with top-down buy-in to create a safe environment for all children; requires all staff to build positive relationships with children and families and incorporate mental health professionals into the school community (Cole et al., 2005; Cole et al., 2013).

Outline of Chapters

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Each chapter reviews every stage of the research study process and what was gleaned from those processes. The chapters include the following:

- Chapter One introduces this study and the inspiration to complete it, including a statement of the problem, theoretical underpinnings, the purpose of the study, assumptions, validity, significance of the study, and definition of terms.
- Chapter Two reviews the literature's scope across traumatology and early education fields. I review literature describing the prevalence of child maltreatment and its implications on development, expected behavior in young children, the impact of attachment within the home and early learning centers, widespread issues found within early education workforce preparation and support, and the implications those barriers have on the early learning environment.
- Chapter Three goes in-depth about the methodology I used to complete this study from start to finish. I review the study's design, recruitment of study participants, data collection and distribution methods, data analysis procedures, validity, and delimitations.
- Chapter Four describes the themes and findings uncovered in my study. I illustrate in detail the steps I took during data analysis and how those steps led me to my conclusions. I review each theme and significant finding in-depth and connect participant experiences to the literature.
- Chapter Five summarizes the study and reviews implications for the field, including teachers, leadership, and policymakers. I review study limitations and recommend future research directions before concluding the chapter.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Connectedness has the power to counterbalance adversity. ~ Dr. Bruce Perry

Connectedness between preschool children and their teachers is critical. Close relationships can support resilience and pro-social behaviors. Young children are malleable. Due to the human brain's plasticity, experiences begin to influence development from the moment of conception. Supported teachers can assist with their young students' developmental and behavioral needs in early learning settings.

To provide a well-rounded picture of the developing child and their challenging behaviors, this chapter will review literature that describes early childhood developmental norms within the United States and, in addition, illuminate the impact potentially traumatic events have on young children's learning and, thus, behavior. This chapter will also review the literature supporting the influence of relationships within the home and within the early learning center, along with how critical it is for early education teachers to have a shared understanding of the impact of trauma. The chapter will conclude by exploring the variabilities found across policies and pre-service preparation and a summary of future directions and contributions to the literature.

Early Childhood Developmental Norms within the US

During the preschool years, children aged 2.9 years to 5.11 years experience rapid growth, not only physically but cognitively as well. Their physical coordination, strength, and agility all begin to be refined. This includes their ability to create art with intention, starting to engage in self-help skills such as zipping up their coat or tying their shoes, and engaging in more complex play (Trawick-Smith, 2018).

Development "involves interaction between organism and environment…the external becomes internal and becomes transformed in the process. But, because, from its beginnings, the organism begins to change the environment, the internal becomes external and becomes transformed in the process" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 177). This section reviews literature from a cultural, ecological perspective, thus introducing a brief overview of what is agreed to be the typical behavior and developmental milestones during the age span of three to five years, with the caveat that a child's development makes sense within the context of their circumstance and might not be expected elsewhere. Rogoff (2003) states, "Variations in expectations for children make sense once we take into account different circumstances and traditions" (p. 6). Rogoff stresses that "because most research on child development has focused on middle-class European American populations, there is more basis for making generalizations about human development in this cultural community than in many others" (p. 84). It is important to note and, therefore, understand that the generalizations written in this section do not fully account for all the variance occurring within child development across communities.

Rogoff's (2003) cultural approach to development complements Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which is foundational to an understanding of how we make meaning. Therefore, I will use these perspectives when highlighting research to examine child development in the early years.

Social and Emotional Development

In preschool, children engage in cooperative and symbolic play versus solitary or parallel play (Trawick-Smith, 2018; Vig, 2007). Vygotsky (1978) describes how children's sociodramatic schemes can include assigned roles and rules. It is often when children begin to act out or try out

different experiences they have gone through and witnessed. Vygotsky (1978) states, "…because play seems to be invented at the point when a child begins to experience unrealizable tendencies…the preschool child enters an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play" (p. 93). Current research (Campbell et al., 2016b; Tayler, 2015; Vig, 2007) agrees with Vygotsky's view on the importance of play, suggesting that play is a foundational component for children to practice their emotion regulation and problem-solving (Campbell et al., 2016b). Campbell et al. (2016b) explain that children can increase their competence in social and emotional learning when they play openly with one another, allowing them to practice their skills and have interactions to build upon (p. 29). Researchers (Campbell et al., 2016b; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2011) highlight the vital role preschool teachers have in facilitating these opportunities for young children and the importance of the relationship between preschool teacher and child in supporting the development of these skills.

Preschool children are typically egocentric, meaning they are learning to take another person's perspective (Trawick-Smith, 2018). This is often seen during play when a child wants a toy another child has and takes it without asking. During this stage, with adult guidance, children can learn how their peers might be feeling and show an understanding of how their actions impacted their peers (Trawick-Smith, 2018).

Cole et al. (2009) conducted a study that included 116 children between the ages of 3.0 and 4.11 years old to explore how children's understanding of emotions was connected to their ability to utilize self-regulation strategies (p. 329). Using a variety of assessments to measure children's language, temperament, and understanding of emotion strategies, researchers concluded there were differences between three- and four-year-old children's abilities in

understanding how to regulate negative emotions. Researchers reported their study added to the current understanding that children between three and four years old are developing emotional intelligence and that four-year-old children better understand strategies for regulating anger. Factors that appeared to influence children's skill level were receptive language and age (p. 341).

Cognition and Language Development

Preschool children develop practical skills and an increased ability to engage in serve and return with adults and peers (Trawick-Smith, 2018). During play or other times when problem-solving is required, preschool children will engage in self-talk, which is when they talk out loud to themselves to work through the issue in front of them or steps they are in the process of taking to complete the task (Vygotsky, 1978). If children are prevented from engaging in self-talk, it can be observed that these children might freeze or fail to complete solving their problem. This is due to their inner monologue being an outer monologue at this stage and assisting their thought process (Vygotsky, 1978). During these years, children also develop increased expressive language, including phonological, phonemic, and syntax awareness (Trawick-Smith, 2018), with expected individual variability due to a child's home life and culture (Rogoff, 2003; Tayler, 2015). Vig (2007) reports the connection between language development and opportunities to play, citing that with increased complexity in play schemes, children use and practice more vocabulary and show growth in receptive language (p. 206).

In preschool, children begin to categorize objects, understand one-to-one correspondence, gain spatial sense, and count to 100. Children's executive function also begins to gain strength during this period, although most three-year-old children will have challenges due to their skills not increasing yet, which is wholly expected (Carlson & Wang, 2007; Campbell et al., 2016b; Mittal et al., 2013; Wiebe et al., 2011). The literature available on how executive function and

emotion regulation develop during the preschool years agrees these skills are foundational for positive learning outcomes (Alamos et al., 2022; Campbell et al., 2016b; Mittal et al., 2013; Trawick-Smith, 2018)

Researchers also agree that executive function and emotion regulation skills do not develop independently or predictably but rather in tandem. In other words, these domains cannot be separated into different developmental domains due to the dependence these skills have on one another (Blankson et al., 2013; Carlson & Wang, 2007; Campbell et al., 2016b; Denham et al., 2012; Tayler, 2015). With a supportive environment, children will be more likely to develop control of these capacities (Campbell et al., 2016b; Cole et al., 2009; Denham et al., 2012; Kuhn & Knoche, 2017). However, it has also been noted that measuring children's executive function and emotion regulation before age three is challenging due to a child's continued development of expressive and receptive language skills (Campbell et al., 2016b). The literature explains that due to children's developing executive function and emotion regulation skills, behaviors such as impulsivity, moments of aggression, and big emotions should be expected (Campbell et al., 2016b; Onchwari & Keengew, 2011). This is because of children's emerging ability to stop their preferred task or movement and redirect their behavior or emotion elsewhere (Alamos et al., 2022; Carlson & Wang, 2007; Mittal et al., 2013).

"Typical" Challenging Behavior. As Rogoff (2003) suggested, children develop within the context of their immediate environment. Children's behavior might be seen as maladaptive in one environment, but in another, it might be adaptive. In other words, children behave in ways that show how they understand the world around them (Kaiser & Sklar Rasminsky, 2009; Perry, 1997; Perry & Pollard, 1998).

But what about *how* children learn to display challenging behavior? Is it part of their expected development or learning? Researchers contend that behavior labeled as aggressive can show some variation between gender, age, and onset, however overall, behavior labeled as aggressive, defiant, or impulsive is expected during the early childhood years (Alink et al., 2006; Campbell et al., 2016b; Hartup, 1974; Kalb & Leober, 2003; Kochanska, 2002; Martin et al., 2018; Rogoff, 2003). Young children typically engage in conflict over toys, space, and play ideas, although they also show skills in negotiation and sympathy for others (Campbell, 2002).

Bronfenbrenner (1967, as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005) suggests people, including young children, can be swayed by pressure to conform to what others are doing, including aggressive behavior (p. 204). Bronfenbrenner (1967, as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005) describes children's ability to learn from those around them, including aggressive behavior they may not have previously engaged in. Alink et al. (2006) agree with this but also go further by leaning towards a theory that if all young children engage in aggressive behavior, it is also likely to be developmentally appropriate (p. 955).

Alink et al. (2006) conducted a longitudinal study in the Netherlands with a sample of 2,253 children aged 12, 24, and 36 months and repeated with the same sample a year later. In the context of their study, they define physical aggression "as behavior that may cause physical harm to people, animals, or objects. Examples of physical aggression are hitting, kicking, and fighting" (p. 956). Alink et al. concluded children as young as 12 months of age (mothers report 52%, fathers report 46%) engage in some sort of physical aggression, with a shown increase in two-year-old (mothers report 80% and fathers report 74%) and three-year-old (mothers report 78% and fathers report 68%) children but decline in four-year-old children (p. 961-962). The researchers conclude physical aggression is likely due to a child's development of autonomy and

lack of expressive language development. Physical aggression decreases as children develop skills to communicate more effectively (p. 962).

Adding to the conversation, Campbell et al. (2016b) describe behaviors during the early childhood years that would be considered typical but which can often be misunderstood as problematic. They discuss everyday life events, such as sibling birth (p. 28), that can cause a child to display less emotional regulation while adjusting to this change. Campbell et al. (2016b) describe challenging behaviors as those of "poor impulse control (can't wait, grabs toys), poor attentional control (can't pay attention for more than a few seconds), aggressive behavior (hits other children), and non-compliance (doesn't listen, defiant) …" (p. 29) and that these behaviors before preschool age are not serious unless in an "extreme case" (p.31). The researchers suggest considering how "*serious and stable"* (p. 29) these behaviors are across the preschool years, as well as considering the child's family system and stressors (p. 29) to make informed decisions about how best to support the child and their family (p. 30). Loomis et al. (2023) agree, suggesting underdeveloped or developing inhibitory control contributes to the behaviors within preschool classrooms that teachers may find challenging, including bolting, being disruptive, aggression, and lack of the ability to regulate emotions (p. 2).

Kalb and Leober (2003) explain the prevalence of noncompliance or defiance during early and middle childhood. According to these authors, "child noncompliance is one of the most frequent reasons for psychiatric referral of young children" (p. 641). Kalb and Leober define these behaviors as,

> Behavioral noncompliance, also known as defiance…refers to those instances when a child either actively or passively, but purposefully, does not perform a behavior that has been requested by a parent or other adult authority figure (e.g., a teacher or school bus

> driver)….Defiance also implies an element of resistance to parental control (i.e., saying no just to say no) (p. 641).

Kalb and Leober (2003) describe defiance as typical throughout early childhood due to children's development of autonomy and self-expression and the increase in more complex demands from adults (p. 642). In agreement with previous experts (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2009 Perry, 1997; Perry & Pollard, 1998), the context in which defiance and other problematic behaviors occur, the age of the child, and, at times, the gender, are all important elements to understanding how serious or significant the issue is. The reasoning is that parents and other adults (e.g., teachers) all hold different value systems and, therefore, expectations and judgments on what precisely young children should or should not do within any given setting *and* how those expectations are delivered to a young child, should all be considered when unpacking the "why" to a child's behavior (p. 646-647).

Kalb and Leober (2003) conclude that before the age of seven, children's defiance should be considered within expected developmental norms, and it is the adult in the relationship that can change their behavior to better support the child's ability to follow through on any adult requests (p. 648).

There is clear evidence within the literature that suggests it is widespread for young children to display behavior that some adults may find challenging. Behaviors such as impulsivity, defiance, aggression, and short attention are expected for children under the age of three, with some increases in capacities between the ages of three to five years old. The literature suggests that intense and frequent behaviors without a clear triggering stressor should be of concern, but in other cases, they should be considered developmentally appropriate. In other words, children's challenging behavior may be exacerbated by facing traumatic experiences.

Therefore, it is critical for early education teachers to understand how trauma can impact children's development and behavior.

Impact of Traumatic Experiences on the Developing Child

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, on average, one in four children in the United States will face some form of adversity in their life (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], n.d.). Often, these adversities, such as housing insecurity, neglect, or experiencing physical abuse, are repetitive and occur within their home (AAP, n.d.; National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2019). Potentially adverse experiences may include bullying, poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, living in foster care, community violence, racism, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence (Cronholm et al., 2015; Felitti et al., 1998).

The Child Maltreatment Report of 2021 (The Children's Bureau at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023) reported in Massachusetts that 74,355 children had abuse or neglect reports filed on their behalf. Of the 74,355 reports made, more than half, or 53.5% of reports were substantiated. Of the 588,229 nationally reported abuse and neglect cases in 2021, an alarming 28% of victims were aged birth to two years, and a staggering 66% of those children who succumbed to their injuries were three years of age or younger.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines a child maltreatment victim as "a child for whom the state determined at least one maltreatment was substantiated or indicated…This includes a child who died, and the death was confirmed to be the result of child abuse and neglect" (p. 20). In fact, according to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2019), child abuse is the leading cause of death within the first year of life.

Research in the field of traumatology suggests infants and young children experiencing trauma or multiple adversities show a negative impact on their development, behavior, relationships, and learning. This includes young children who witness violence against or threat of violence against their primary caregiver. These children can experience the same psychological damage as if it were the child being harmed or threatened harm (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995).

The first five years of a child's life comprise a sensitive and critical period in brain development, with the human brain developing to 90% of its adult size by the time a child is four years old (Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995). The impacts of developmental trauma on the brain during this crucial period impact fundamental psychodevelopmental processes such as attachment, emotional regulation, self-concept, and impulse control (NCTSN, 2019). Children who are the victims of, or witnesses to, potentially traumatic events are more likely to have internalized or externalized behaviors (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2016a; Connell et al., 2018; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015; Howes et al., 2013; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995 Post et al., 2020b; Ziv et al., 2021).

Research has shown that these traumatic experiences have lasting impacts, sometimes life-long, on health outcomes. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study conducted in the late 1990s concluded that children and youth who experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were 12 times more likely to develop health risks such as heart disease and mental health issues. These individuals are also three times more likely to smoke cigarettes, report poor overall health, engage in risky sexual behavior, and be obese (Felitti et al., 1998).

The seminal research of the ACE Study has limitations such as a lack of diversity within a sample size of 9,508 participants, with 79.4% being White, almost half of the respondents (43%) had graduated from college, and all were adults. The other limitation is that the data collected was from one location, San Diego, California. The questionnaire did not account for differentiating between a single occurrence and multiple occurrences of the adverse experience (Felitti et al., 1998). However, this study brought significant attention to adversity and its lasting impacts on children in the field and a broader national audience. Since the foundational ACE study, many more studies have been conducted, with varying intersections of demographics, to gain an even clearer picture of how adversity in childhood can impact a person's overall development. One subsequent study changed how the field defines an ACE.

Finkelhor et al. (2013) conducted a national study of 2,030 youth aged 10-17 years in the U.S. through phone interviews. The researchers used the original ACE questionnaire as well as an expanded questionnaire, with questions surrounding experiences with peer violence, bullying, neighborhood violence, foster care, and socioeconomic status. Although this study was not longitudinal, it shed light on how to understand better all the potentially adverse experiences a child may have throughout their childhood so that future studies could continue refining the ACE screening tool.

Traumatic Experiences Impact Behavior

The findings from the ACE Study (Felitti et al., 1998) were a landmark addition to the field, furthering multiple studies that support the theory that trauma experienced in infancy and early childhood years has profound and lasting effects on the developing brain.

The following current research used a variety of methodologies to highlight the impact abuse, neglect, and multiple adverse experiences have on the developing brain in infants and young children. These studies confirm the original ACEs study conclusion (Felitti et al., 1998).

Leading experts in the field of traumatology assert the result of trauma correlates with issues such as depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, intrusive thoughts, low self-esteem, and phobias (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995; van der Kolk, 2015). Research also suggests externalizing behavior such as an inability to self-regulate, self-destructive behavior, aggression, difficulty sleeping, an inability or challenges attaching to others, regression in previously acquired skills, withdrawal or dissociation, substance use, heightened arousal, hypervigilance, academic challenges, and incarceration, can be due to experiencing trauma (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2016a; Connell et al., 2018; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995).

Researchers Anda et al. (2006) took the ACE Study conducted by Felitti et al. (1998) a step further within their study, using logistic regression analysis to assess 18 extended health and behavior risk outcomes in 17,421 individuals who had reported experiencing adverse experiences before the age of 18 years from the ACE Study database. This database is connected to Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Center in California, which collaborated on the original ACE Study (Felitti et al., 1998). According to these researchers, the current study was conducted to assess multiple risk factors for known outcomes due to adverse experiences, as prior research mainly focuses on singular traumatic experiences.

Considering literature that supports the effects of trauma on the developing brain, Anda et al. (2006) posited that many forms of maltreatment would affect a range of health and behavior risk outcomes due to comorbidity (p. 176). The logistic regression analysis concluded that the " 'dose-response' relationship between the number of ACEs and each of the outcomes" (p. 182) had a direct correlation. These results support the held knowledge that adverse childhood experiences and complex trauma impact multiple areas of the brain, which can have life-long effects. Anda et al. suggest understanding the dose-response relationship between adverse childhood experiences, health and behavior risk outcomes, and future interventions may be more beneficial when treated with a multidisciplinary approach (p. 183).

A study conducted by Hambrick et al. (2018b) examined the relationships between the timing of developmental adversity, relational health, and developmental outcomes in children is also compelling. Clinicians using the Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics approach to clinical work with children report on the degree of the client's current relational health, timing of developmental experiences, and current client functioning. Of the 3,523 reports synthesized from children ages six to thirteen, results indicate experiences during the perinatal period were more indicative of current dysfunction in functioning than experiences in other early childhood periods. Results also suggest relational poverty during the perinatal period was a more substantial factor than other adversities. Relationally rich milieus may buffer the effects of adversities experienced (Hambrick et al., 2018b).

In another study to determine the effects of trauma, Oosterman et al. (2010) conducted research that further underscores the physiological effects complex trauma has on the developing brain and its lasting impact. This study included 60 children in foster care between the ages of 2.2 and 7.3 years. Oosterman et al. examined autonomic nervous system reactivity in response to

when these children were in a controlled situation with their foster parent near them and when a stranger was near them without their foster parent. Both separations and reunions occurred twice within the allotted time frame (p. 112).

Oosterman et al. (2010) used the Cassidy and Marvin system designed to code attachment in children aged three to five (p. 111). The results of this study indicated that children with known disordered attachment show a more activated response of their sympathetic nervous system (part of the autonomic nervous system) than that of children with known ordered attachment, which supports attachment theory (p. 114). The results also indicated children with disordered attachment show an activated stress response upon reunion with a caregiver, further supporting the hypothesis suggesting that children experiencing complex trauma may perceive a threat when there is none (pp. 116-117).

According to Briggs-Gowan et al. (2010), little research has been conducted on the correlation specifically between family violence and its developmental effect on young children when excluding socioeconomic status, parental depression, and anxiety status (p. 3). Briggs-Gowan et al. conducted a study with 213 children referred from mental health clinics (48%) and non-referred children who were found within referring communities (52%), ages 2 – 4 years old. The children were assessed for potentially traumatic events (PTE) exposure through data collected by parent surveys and research assistants conducting a standardized developmental assessment of the children. This study showed a positive correlation between exposure to PTE and symptoms and disorders in children, specifically family violence and depression, anxiety, and disruptive behavior in the children. Children with PTE, but within non-family environments, showed evidence of anxiety (p. 7). These results further implicate the impact of complex trauma

on the developing brain of young children and the need for early intervention and education to providers (p. 9).

Holmes et al. (2018) conducted a longitudinal data analysis using a cohort sequential Growth Mixture Model (CS-GMM) to examine a sample of 1,776 children reported to Child Protective Services from birth to age five. The trajectory of their complex traumatic experiences negatively impacted their language development and academic skills. Holmes et al. called attention to the lack of research conducted (a) focusing on the developmental impact of trauma beginning with language development and (b) the lack of research conducted on maltreated children under the age of ten in this specific area (p. 99).

The authors interpreted the results from this study using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The results indicated five group types of children, suggesting trajectories of children experiencing complex trauma have individual journeys, possibly influenced by different protective or risk factors (Holmes et al., 2018, p. 100). Those who experienced neglect or physical abuse during infancy and early childhood showed a likelihood of poor language and academic skills, supporting the theory of a critical and sensitive time for brain development in the first few years of life.

In addition, children in this study who experienced a responsive caregiver and stimulation in their environment were likely to have more prosocial skills and fewer academic challenges. Holmes et al. (2018) state the results of this study indicate the need for further research to understand the effects of complex trauma on the developing brain and the outcome of language development within this population of children. At the age range these children first were examined, the data would indicate language development trajectory was not affected by the adversity being experienced. However, once this analysis was conducted, it showed an apparent

decline in some groups of children, furthering the need for ongoing developmental assessment of children experiencing trauma (p. 101).

Together, these studies give compelling insight into the importance of furthering research on this topic so that the full scope of the developmental impact of trauma is understood. Findings underscore the changes within the brain, including behavioral, health, and learning outcomes.

Traumatic Experiences Impact Brain Organization

Despite evidence from decades of research that supports the understanding of the impact traumatic experiences have on young children, there is a widely held misconception that young children are born naturally resilient, leaving them unaware or unharmed by their traumatic experiences (Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Perry et al., 1995). However, experts in the field suggest this is simply untrue due to the fact young brains are malleable and, therefore, are more affected by experiences, leading traumatic experiences to cause more disruption to the developing brain than when compared to an adult experiencing a similar event (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995).

The brain comprises billions of neurons operating different systems that control a human's response to their environment (Perry et al., 1995). The lower region of the brain, the brainstem, controls basic survival needs. The middle region of the brain, the diencephalon, controls regulation and arousal. In the higher regions of the brain, the limbic system regulates emotion and attachment, and the cortex controls cognition and language (p. 274).

Neurodevelopment is sequential and hierarchical (Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Perry, 2002). According to Perry (2002), neurodevelopment falls within what Perry calls "core principles." These include:

1) influences of genetics and environment

2) sequential development: beginning with the development of the brainstem at birth and developing mid- and higher regions of the brain throughout childhood and adolescence

3) activity-dependent: in other words, if the brain is not stimulated, neurons will die off

4) "windows of opportunity and windows of vulnerability": sensitive and critical periods for each area of the brain to develop (pp. 86-88).

According to Gaskill and Perry (2012), when information is taken into the brain (i.e., sound, taste, touch, smell, sight), the brain first processes this information through the brainstem. At this level, the information is unconscious and is being interpreted and stored. Next, the information is sent through the other brain regions, undergoing the same interpretative and storing process. At each stage, the information received is stored, and the response it triggers creates a memory for future activation. Evidence has shown that when abusive and neglectful experiences activate the brain's autonomic nervous system, the lower region of the brain that controls survival instincts and reactions (e.g., "fight or flight"), a human's ability to access executive function decreases, along with the ability to hear and communicate clearly.

The brain develops through exposure and experience (Perry, 2002). Therefore, if a child experiences a predictable, consistent, and loving environment, the child's developing brain will be stimulated and develop a healthy stress response that supports emotional regulation, attachment, and learning (Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995; Perry, 2002).

In contrast, if the lower region of the brain is continually activated when a child experiences traumatic events or witnesses abuse or threats to a primary caregiver, "fight or flight" becomes the automatic response system. Over time, if this brain region is activated more

than the cortex, the survival response will become overdeveloped. This overdevelopment will cause the child's sympathetic nervous system to remain initiated (Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995; Perry, 2002). In turn, the child will likely be in a constant state of hyperarousal or dissociative state, which can cause detrimental effects on the brain (Anda et al., 2006; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Hambrick et al., 2018a; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; Perry, 2002). Evidence suggests high levels of stress hormones, or cortisol, released from the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis are associated with brain alterations, including an association with reduced size in the brain's cortex (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; NCTSN, 2019; Perry, 2002).

Research in the field of traumatology suggests infants and young children experiencing developmental trauma or multiple adversities show a negative impact on their development, behavior, relationships, and learning. This includes young children who witness violence against or threat of violence against their primary caregiver. These children can experience the same psychological damage as if it were the child being harmed or threatened harm (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995). The more adverse experiences a child has, the more the child's brain will organize neural pathways to support behavior that is a response to an unattuned or threatening environment, again directly impacting their developmental potential. A "fight or flight" response will become automatic (Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Blehar et al., 1977; Perry, 2002; Sroufe, 2005).

The impact developmental trauma has on the developing brain occurs within the brain structure and can manifest itself within a maltreated child's behavior. A result of this overdevelopment of the lower region of the brain is that maltreated children often display behavior that does not match the child's situational context. In other words, a maltreated child

may perceive a threat when there is none (Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010).

Perry et al. (1995) suggest that the maltreated child will likely begin to automatically respond with aggressive behavior towards the perceived threat in these situations. In addition, if this aggressive response from the child does not gain a sense of safety for the child, the child will then likely begin to show more dissociation or a "surrender" response (p. 279) in an effort to avoid or, in their own way, become "invisible" from the threat (NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995).

Over time, children who are the victims of, or witnesses to, potentially traumatic events are more likely to have internalized or externalized behaviors (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2016a; Connell et al., 2018; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015; Howes et al., 2013; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995 Post et al., 2020b; Ziv et al., 2021). Maltreated children may have internalized behavior such as depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, intrusive thoughts, low self-esteem, and phobias (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995), or externalizing behavior, such as an inability to self-regulate emotions, display self-destructive behavior, aggression, difficulty sleeping, have an inability or challenges attaching to others, regression in previously acquired skills, withdrawing or dissociation, substance use, heightened arousal, hypervigilance, and academic difficulties (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2016a; Connell et al., 2018; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015; Howes et al., 2013; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995; Post et al., 2020b; Ziv et al., 2021).

Young children who display internalized and externalized behaviors of aggression, property destruction, noncompliance, and withdrawal, or in other words, "challenging behavior" (Strain & Timm, 2001), are more likely to be suspended or expelled from their early learning center (Gilliam, 2005; Giordano et al., 2021; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019), instead of being met with a trauma-sensitive approach. According to Gilliam (2005), prekindergarten students are expelled from early learning centers in Massachusetts at a rate of 34 times more than youth in grades K-12 and 13 times more than the national U.S. average, leading to an average of 17,000 preschoolers expelled each year (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). In these instances, early education teachers have been less likely to develop a close and positive relationship with these children (Alamos et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Hur et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2014; Li & Julian, 2012; Lippard et al., 2018; Moen et al., 2019; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020a; Sabol et al., 2018; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Vu, 2015; Wolcott et al., 2019) or the families of these children (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Crane et al., 2013; Eismann et al., 2020; Gilliam et al., 2016; Giordano et al., 2021; Howes et al., 2013; Westerberg et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

In a case study by Aksoy (2020), ten preschool teachers in the mid-south of the United States were interviewed to determine the most frequent challenging behaviors found within their classrooms. These teachers reported externalizing behaviors of shouting, pushing, noncompliance, not sharing, and crying as the most frequent.

Westling (2010) examined the views held by preschool and elementary special education teachers and general education teachers regarding the adequacy of their pre-service and in-service training to teach children with challenging behaviors, the perceptions about the cause of challenging behaviors, and the support they receive. This study took place in the southeastern

United States. Both special and general education teachers reported defiance, noncompliance, disruption, and socially inappropriate behavior as the most challenging. Both special and general education teachers reported the belief that challenging behavior can be improved. Still, they did not report using effective strategies such as Applied Behavior Analysis or Positive Behavior Support. Finally, an average of 30-40% of respondents reported receiving adequate pre-service training to support these students or receiving sufficient on-the-job support.

Children who are experiencing maltreatment need to be welcomed into a safe and responsive learning environment, not expelled from it. Considering the fundamental role early learning centers have within a child's ecological system, the early education system must understand best practices that can develop a trauma-sensitive model and culture within the program (Cole et al., 2013; Post et al., 2020a; Ruprecht et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). With the staggering number of young children who are maltreated, answering the question, "How do adverse childhood experiences impact young children?" is imperative to seek out and understand in the field of early education.

Relationships Matter

Parents and other attachment figures, such as early education teachers, are the key to exposing children to warm and responsive caregiving and building secure attachments with children. Their responses and reactions to children's needs will shape their relationships and subsequent relationships children are introduced to (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Bowlby, 1982; Sroufe, 2005). Securely attached preschool children have demonstrated more confidence in their approaches to learning, engagement with others, and development of executive function. These skills promote a positive sense of self, encouraging risk-taking in children's learning. Prosocial behavior in preschool leads to fewer feelings of

loneliness, improved friendship skills, peer acceptance, and academic achievement. Conversely, maltreated children are more likely to be withdrawn, display externalized and internalized behavior, and have a deflated sense of self. This can lead to early education teachers having more of a challenge developing a relationship with these children, which, in turn, directly impacts a child's ability to increase social and emotional competencies (Anthonysamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Goodvin et al., 2008; Kelly et al., 1996; Masten, 2009; Ontai & Thompson, 2002).

As learned through attachment theory, a strong relationship can support a child's sense of safety by providing a secure base to return to while exploring and discovering. If children feel a sense of safety, they will be more apt to be available to process new information and seek out new experiences, supporting their growth in social and emotional capacities. A parent's ability to form a strong relationship with their child can be influenced by their relationship with the ecological systems in their lives, such as work, their neighborhood, and how they were parented.

The Influence of Attachment on the Developing Child

Many facets impact children's development, including epigenetics and biology; however, the strength of the attachment between a young child and their attachment figure and their daily experiences are enormously influential for a young child to reach their developmental potential.

The brain develops through exposure and experience (Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Blehar et al., 1977; Perry, 2002; Sroufe, 2005). Therefore, if a child experiences a predictable, consistent, and loving environment, the child's developing brain will be stimulated and develop a healthy stress response that supports emotional regulation, attachment, and developmental potential (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Blehar et al., 1977; Bowlby,

1982; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995; Perry, 2002; Sroufe, 2005).

The sense of security provided by a parent to a child is shown to be one of the most critical foundational relationships in a child's life. An infant's relationship with their parent will create the internal template in which the infant will compare others for the rest of their life (Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; Page et al., 2021). Considering this compelling information, it is imperative to understand early relationships' influence on a child's brain development, including those relationships with early education teachers (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2019; Vu, 2015).

Attachment in the Home

Humans are a social species. Our ancestors lived within large groups, with an average of four adults caring for one child and caring for each other (Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010). In today's U.S. society, families often live far from one another, and schools, including early learning centers, have upwards of one or two adults to twenty children (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010). The mother-infant dyad is embedded within many systems, including the family unit, the community, culture, and geographic location. These systems strongly influence the expected norms of development (Rogoff, 2003), and therefore, children's development needs to be considered within the context of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Ontai & Thompson, 2002).

A parent is in the leading role of establishing attachment, which includes initiating and maintaining interactions with their child. A child's development is deeply connected to the care that they receive. If a parent is attuned and responsive, a child can organize and adapt their attachment around their parent's predictability. In contrast, a child whose parent does not show

affection and does not respond to the child's needs or who may be threatening will organize and adapt their attachment around the predictability of unpredictability. Infants and children who develop a secure attachment will use their parent as a secure base for exploration, maintaining contact through clinging, climbing, embracing, reaching, warm greeting, and seeking comfort after separation. Infants and children who develop an insecure attachment will likely engage in little exploration and may be resistant to contact with their parent after separation (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Anthonysamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 2005; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Sroufe, 2005; Wyman et al., 1991).

Ainsworth and Bell (1970) conducted seminal research on children's attachment behavior to their biological mothers. Participants included 56 white middle-class infants, 49-51 weeks old. Of the 53 infants, 23 were followed from birth and participated in the research project at 51 weeks, and 33 infants were observed independently of the research project at 49 weeks. Throughout eight separate trials, each mother and her infant were in a designated room for observation. Each trial involved different configurations of a mother, an infant, and a stranger. The infant's behavior towards the mother and stranger and separations and reunions were observed. The conclusion of the Strange Situation research confirmed what is posited in attachment theory. Infants sought proximity to their mothers when distressed and found a sense of safety through coregulation once their mothers returned. However, some infant participants did not use their mothers as a secure base for exploration in the research environment nor showed consistent distress or regulation following separation or reunion. This suggests these infants appeared to be insecurely attached to their mothers.

Although the participants were limited to white middle-class families, Ainsworth and Bell (1970) were able to support the theory that the process of attachment seems to be evolutionary due to infants needing to survive. For infants to survive, a strong bond must be formed with their primary attachment figure. Their research also supports the notion that the activation of the attachment system occurs through strangeness, and the specificity of a preferred attachment figure can create a sense of safety.

Sroufe (2005) conducted a 30-year longitudinal study to understand the developing person. Sroufe recruited 200 mother-infant dyads in an urban area and followed them throughout the study. Methods included replicating the Strange Situation to test out Bowlby's hypotheses that individual differences in quality or effectiveness of infant-caregiver attachment were primarily a product of the history of the interaction with the caregiver and if variations in attachment quality were the foundation for later differences in personality. Sroufe concluded infant development is inextricably tied to the care they receive. Similarly, the care parents provide depends on the nature of the surrounding stressors and the support provided in their lives.

Attachment and Relationships in Early Learning Centers. There are many three- and four-year-old children enrolled in preschool across the U.S., with the most recent 2021 data revealing 34% of three- and four-year-old children in the U.S. (1,358,247 total children) were enrolled in state-funded preschool (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022). Young children spend upwards of 40 or more weekly hours in early learning centers. Therefore, establishing a close and positive relationship with their teacher is critical for a child's developmental outcomes. It is likely young children will approach their early education teacher in a similar way they do their parents due to a child's internal template of how the world operates and how humans are (Jerome

et al., 2009; Perry et al., 2016; Vu, 2015; Zee et al., 2020) has been formed before they enter preschool.

Research highlights the influence attachment has on learning and life skills. Several protective factors have been shown to increase a child's capacity to move forward after adverse life events, including a positive early childhood temperament, a supportive family milieu, a positive relationship with at least one primary caregiver, and available meaningful support from extended family or other adults, including teachers (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016). Early education teachers can act as a buffer to potentially adverse early experiences. In other words, early education teachers can model attuned and attentive caregiving to young children, which can build a child's emotional capacity, which in turn will create more opportunities for a child to be successful in preschool. Early education teaching styles can influence how children respond to teachers and peers, directly affecting the classroom climate and children's sense of safety and security. A sense of safety may allow children's "learning brain" (or frontal cortex) to light up for processing new information. However, if a child does not feel a sense of safety, the reverse can happen, which may cause them to put their guard up and prevent their "learning brain" from being available for processing (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2019).

Warm and responsive teaching provides children with a safe environment and emotional support, including space to express their feelings, an opportunity to learn from adults' modeling of emotions, and allows for more open communication about positive and negative emotions. All these moments can influence a child's relationship with their teacher (Lippard et al., 2018; Moen et al., 2019). Teacher-child relationships generally marked by closeness tend to develop in warm and responsive environments (Chen et al., 2021; Moen et al., 2019; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). These close relationships can lead to preschoolers demonstrating more confidence in

learning, engagement with others, and strengthening of executive function (Anthonysamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Goodvin et al., 2008; Jerome et al., 2009; Kelly et al., 1996; Masten, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2019; Ontai & Thompson, 2002). Research has shown that emotional intelligence in preschool predicts later classroom adjustment and academic competence in elementary school (Anthonysamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Goodvin et al., 2008; Kelly et al., 1996; Masten, 2009; Ontai & Thompson, 2002). However, teacher-child relationships which are described as marked with conflict may cause children to disengage with the early learning environment, have challenges with forming relationships with peers, and struggle academically (Campbell, 2002; Chen et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2019; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012).

Beier et al. (2019) conducted a study to assess the connection between a child's attachment and a child's ability to be helpful, share, and offer comfort. Participants included 137 children attending four Head Start Centers. The children ranged in age from three to five years old. The Preschool Strange Situation procedure assessed children's attachment to their mothers over two separations and reunions. To evaluate a child's strengths in helping, sharing, and comforting, children were paired with a female experimenter and left in a room together. Through various activities, children's behavior was observed for their ability to help the experimenter with a task, like sharing a snack and comforting the experimenter after she "accidentally" hurt herself. Beier et al. concluded a child's security in their attachment to their mother was positively associated with children's spontaneous helping, sharing, and being more responsive to another's instrumental needs and material desires. Securely attached children's positive views of others and self may contribute to general prosocial disposition. These findings

support attachment theory in that a secure attachment can positively influence development through modeling and scaffolding.

Research indicates that a child's first experiences in preschool, positive or negative, will be carried with them as they continue throughout schooling. Just as their internal template about how the world works follows them into each new situation, early education teachers can begin to reinforce this positive internal template or strengthen this negative outlook as they become an attachment figure for the child (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Jerome et al., 2009; Nguyen et al., 2019; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Vu, 2015; Zee et al., 2020). These early education experiences, positive or negative, therefore, will add to the foundation of a child's established belief system about school and the world (Jerome et al., 2009; Sabol et al., 2018; Wolcott et al., 2019; Zee et al., 2020).

In applying ecological systems theory to the context of the early learning center, one must consider the influences each developing person and environment has on the other. Families who enter an early learning center are influenced by their childhood, culture, current stressors, and community environment, which influence how the family interacts with their child and early education teacher. Children who enter an early learning center are influenced by their life experiences, including known or unknown adversity, culture, attachment style, and community environment. The early education teacher is also influenced by their childhood, culture, current stressors, community environment, professional practices, and pedagogy. The early learning center is influenced by state regulations, funding sources, community culture, and organizational policies, which all influence the school culture within the building and engagement between school and home. Each piece of this system does not stand alone but impacts how adults and children interact. A positive relationship at one level will be mirrored at the next level, for

example, child-teacher, teacher-teacher, and teacher-family (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Vu, 2015).

Albin-Clark et al. (2018) conducted a study that focused on understanding how the ecological systems of a teacher's life impact forming a relationship with their students in early education. The authors used both an attachment theory framework and a developmental systems theory framework. Using a narrative methodology, 16 interviews were conducted, with four being reported on within their paper. Two major themes were uncovered during these interviews. Albin-Clark et al. report that teachers learn about how to relate to children through their personal lives as well as from their professional lives. The authors explain these teachers applied their professional experiences with role change, professional development, and colleagues' personal experiences as parents to their understanding of what children need from them as teachers. Their study contributes to the belief that ecological systems influence not only a child's experiences in the classroom but also the experiences of teachers and families.

Implications of the Teacher-Family Relationship. As stated above, a close relationship between teacher and child can buffer experienced adversities. Early education teachers and early learning centers are uniquely positioned to serve as the key point of contact with young children and their families daily. It is also important to note that parents also benefit from the buffering effect of a close relationship between their child and teacher, as well as themselves (Eismann et al., 2020). A close relationship with an early education teacher will likely elicit more conversations and encouraging vignettes about their child's day. This can lead a parent to view their child more encouragingly, especially if the parent has challenges with their child at home. However, the opposite can also be true. If an early education teacher reports to a parent a

challenge they are experiencing with the child within their preschool classroom, a parent can feel increased stress (Westerberg et al., 2020).

In the context of parent-teacher relationships, success can be measured when the relationship includes open communication, consistency, perspective-taking, flexibility, persistence, and a level of comfort with one another (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Like the teacher-child relationship, an early education teacher's perception of a parent will impact their ability to develop a relationship with the parent and child. Research shows it can be common for early education teachers to perceive a child through a deficit lens if the child's family is experiencing stressors such as incarceration, unemployment, or divorce (Chen & Phillips, 2018; Spence et al., 2022; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). It has also been shown that teacher-child and teacher-parent relationships can be strained if the early education teacher holds a different child-rearing philosophy than the parents (Martin et al., 2018; Spence et al., 2022). Another major factor that contributes to early education teachers' perception of children and their parents is if the ethnic background of the family and teacher are not the same (Gilliam, 2005; Howes et al., 2013; Jerome et al., 2009). Gilliam (2005) published a landmark study regarding the prevalence of preschool suspension and expulsion in the United States. The study indicated children of color were more likely to be suspended or expelled from preschool than their white counterparts. This was found to be increased if the teacher and child were of different races (Gilliam, 2005).

Strong relationships between teachers and parents are also critical regarding a teacher's ability to notice if a family might need additional community resources, such as housing assistance, legal advice, or access to food pantries. Understanding a family's values and belief system and how that translates to seeking support is critical for an early education teacher to

know when developing a relationship with them (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Spence et al., 2022).

Research shows disagreement or disregard for parental concerns or teacher concerns about a child's development can occur if a strong relationship between parent and teacher has not been established (Crane et al., 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In some cases, the race of the teacher and child can predict whether unreasonable expectations are held for a child's or parent's behavior due to likely implicit biases (Gilliam et al., 2016; Giordano et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2022). In child development theory, parents have the most tremendous influence on their child's development, for better or worse, and therefore should be considered to understand their child the most. Yet, it is found that although this belief is accepted within the field, parental insight is either not collected from schools or, if it is, might not be given much weight (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). To be the most successful experience for all intertwined within the microsystem of the early learning center, the parent voice should be invited and considered in decision-making, including policy design (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The interactions that take place between an early education teacher and child, child and Peers, early education teachers, and parents cannot help but change the development of all persons involved in the interaction. In this way, relationships that occur within the early learning setting microsystem play a critical role in shaping not only a child's developmental trajectory but also how a parent interacts with their child's school collaterals throughout their education, as well as how early education teachers interact and perceive future children (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Implications of the Teacher-Child Relationship. Observed within the home, a child securely attached to their parent will use their parent as a secure base to return to after exploring

the environment (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 2005). Within the context of an early learning center, attachment theory applies in the same way. A child who has a close relationship with their teacher will also have a sense of safety, which will promote the child's exploration of the classroom environment and engage in social and academic learning opportunities (Cooper et al., 2017; Sabol et al., 2018; Vu, 2015). Children who feel safe in their learning environment can access their cortex and process new information offered to them (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2019).

Teachers might have a more challenging time establishing relationships with children who enter their preschool classroom with an insecure attachment to their parent due to their likely experience with unpredictable adult behavior; children respond to how their caregivers interact with them. Early education teachers must keep a perspective that considers the impact of unknown and known adversities in mind, as well as how attachment impacts relationships in each interaction they have with their students (Cole et al., 2005; Post et al., 2020a; Wolcott et al., 2019). An early education teacher doesn't have to attempt to label or identify children's attachment to their parents; early education teachers are not clinicians. It is essential to understand attachment theory so that early education teachers can remain curious about who their students are and what their behavior might be when communicating with them.

Characteristics of early education teachers are just as vital to children's success as intentionally designed classroom furniture and material arrangement. While it is critical to fill toy shelves with developmentally appropriate materials, structure the day in a predictable fashion, and have small teacher-to-child ratios, the structural qualities have less of an impact on children's success when compared to teacher-child relationships (Pianta et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2018). The key characteristics of early education teachers, which are the building blocks for

establishing positive and close teacher-child relationships are responsiveness, sensitivity, emotional support, and consistent (Blewitt et al., 2020; Howes et al., 2013; Hur et al., 2016; Lippard et al., 2018; Moen et al., 2019; Pianta et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2018; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Wolcott et al., 2019).

In contrast, early education teachers who present with symptoms of stress or depression, such as sluggishness, lack of interest, irritability, and anxiety (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), have been shown to have more issues establishing a positive and close relationship with their students. Early education teachers who present with symptoms of stress or depression are more likely to perceive a child as having challenging behavior (Hamre et al., 2008; Jeon et al., 2014) and less likely to offer meaningful and engaging interactions (Hamre et al., 2008; Sabol et al., 2018). These teachers are also more likely to model ineffective co-regulating techniques and less likely to provide emotional support to children (Alamos et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Jeon et al., 2014), which can lead to children displaying less competencies with social and emotional development (Jeon et al., 2014). Negative or conflictual relationships between teacher and child can reinforce a child's internal template of the world, just as a positive or close relationship would (Sabol et al., 2018; Vu, 2015). This reinforcement can contribute to a child's outlook on their education as they progress (Jerome et al., 2009; Lippard et al., 2018). However, it is also possible for a teacher-child relationship, which is considered to be negative, to lead to closeness developing between the dyad due to the one-to-one time the child and teacher will often be spending together (Hamre et al., 2008; Sabol et al., 2018).

Glover Gagnon et al. (2019) examined the correlation between teaching stress and student-teacher relationships among 44 preschool teachers and 72 preschoolers in North Carolina and Tennessee. To understand the perceived relationship and stress level held by the participants,

the authors administered the Index of Teaching Stress Likert scale and the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale. The findings of their study suggest that the levels of closeness and conflict found within student-teacher relationships were predictors of the teachers' stress levels. Glover Gagnon et al. report that conflict was the strongest predictor of stress and that one teacher's conflictual relationship with a student did not necessarily mean that the student had a conflictual relationship with other teachers, which is a positive finding.

Loomis et al. (2023) examined if a close student-teacher relationship impacted a student's risk for expulsion from preschool. The relationships between 88 preschoolers among 22 Head Start programs and their 17 teachers were examined. The participants completed the Child Behavior Questionnaire-Teacher Short Form, the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale Short Form, and the Preschool Expulsion Risk Measure (p. 182).

Loomis et al. (2023) reported children with higher inhibitory control were found to have a closer relationship with their teachers and lower risk for expulsion. Children with low inhibitory control and more conflict with their teacher were at a higher risk for expulsion. These findings support the positive impact a close relationship between student and teacher can have on a student's success within the classroom.

Early education teachers who are responsive, sensitive, emotionally supportive, and consistent can buffer children's potentially adverse experiences within their homes or a classroom with emotional instability (Lippard et al., 2018; Pianta et al., 2016). The individual relationship established between a child and their early education teacher can become a reliable alternative source of support for the child (Jerome et al., 2009; Moen et al., 2019). Throughout any given day in preschool, early education teachers will spend most of their day teaching the whole class, with only about 25 percent spent with each child individually (Pianta et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, research has shown children's developmental outcomes are positively impacted when they are educated within early learning centers which have consistent dosing of close teacher-child relationships (Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics Network, 2020). This pattern of one-to-one time with the teacher, mixed with whole group time, can be enough to positively influence a child's development in the areas of social and emotional competencies (i.e., self-regulation, frustration tolerance, and positive engagement with peers), literacy and communication skills, and inhibitory control (Alamos et al., 2022; Lippard et al., 2018; Pianta et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2018; Westerberg et al., 2020).

Interactions between teacher and child should be reciprocal. The serve-and-return allows children to engage, feel seen and heard, and teaches a child that they matter. Reciprocity models prosocial behavior for the child to use when engaging with others (Li & Julian, 2012; Pianta et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2018). The more opportunities a child has to interact with their teacher and peers, the more opportunities they have to practice language, emotion, and social skills. The ability to practice these skills and, in turn, develop competencies across these areas can increase a child's success within a school environment and other social settings (Alamos et al., 2022; Sabol et al., 2018).

The available literature suggests that a teacher's perception of a child and closeness in their relationship are strong indicators of a child's behavior in the classroom and the child's relationship with peers. A teacher's perception of a child can affect a child's sense of self and self-esteem, directly influencing agency and ability to take risks in learning. In turn, this will influence a child's developmental outcome (Alamos et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Crane et al., 2013; Hamre et al., 2008; Howes et al., 2013; Hur et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2014; Lippard et al., 2018; Moen et al., 2019; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020a; Post et

al., 2020b; Sabol et al., 2018; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Vu, 2015; Westerberg et al., 2020; Wolcott et al., 2019; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Therefore, teachers must have the knowledge to understand what is behind children's challenging behavior.

The Need for Informed Early Education Teachers

Most early education teachers are unprepared to support children who are displaying challenging behavior (Ai et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2018; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020b; Schaack et al., 2020; Stormont & Young-Walker, 2017; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Only 20 percent of early education teachers in the U.S. receive formal professional development training on the topic of understanding challenging behaviors. Often, these trainings are offered very infrequently (Chen et al., 2021; Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Jamil et al., 2022; Loomis, 2018; Rucker et al., 2023) despite the limited available research showing that early education teachers who do attend professional development surrounding the topic of trauma, expressed improvements in their knowledge, belief, and perception about the impact of trauma on learning (Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Post et al., 2020b).

In addition, early education teachers who have participated in trauma-sensitivity professional development are more empathetic, have an improved understanding of child development and signs of trauma, show an awareness of the importance of self-care, understand the importance of improved family-school communication, make classroom environment changes to increase regulation, and participated in collaboration with early childhood mental health consultants and state agencies for a coordinated delivery system (Cooper et al., 2017; Douglass et al., 2021; Sabol et al., 2018; Ziv et al., 2021; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

Buettner et al. (2016) conducted a national study in the United States to dissect two-year and four-year higher education programs attended by early education teachers. The authors used the quality standards the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Council for Professional Recognition (CPR) put forth. Of the 919 higher education institutions within the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the authors narrowed the sample size to 173 institutions, two-year and four-year programs, found across the United States.

One notable difference Buettner et al. (2016) found between the two-year and four-year programs was the demographic of students attending. Many students within the two-year programs were currently working in the early education field and were non-traditional students. Four-year institutions also focused more on "knowledge" (e.g., academics and curricula), and two-year programs focused on "practices" (e.g., classroom management). Of the entire sample, 60% of higher education institutions offered courses that covered content topics of child development, program and classroom management, families and community, and curricula (p. 166). The authors also determined that of the sample size, only about half of the institutions offered courses covering social and emotional development, and less than half discussed professionalism (p. 166).

Buettner et al. (2016) suggest future research should explore the variability found within their study to determine if there is a correlation between teacher training and children's developmental outcomes and how ongoing professional development can offer topics less covered within higher education programs, such as children's social and emotional development.

Hoffman and Kuvalanka (2019) sought to understand teachers' perceptions of behavior challenges within preschool classrooms to understand if there were curriculum gaps within the

institution the authors taught. Their qualitative study in a rural town in Ohio examined nine teachers across five early learning centers. Participants had various education levels, years in the field, ethnic backgrounds, and ages. The authors structured their interview questions around understanding the attributes or reasons participants thought behavior challenges existed within their classrooms.

Hoffman and Kuvalanka (2019) concluded that four overarching themes were found in the interviews. Participants shared their belief that behavior challenges had increased over the last decade and that participants did not feel adequately prepared for teaching preschool children with challenging behavior due to a lack of topics and practicum experiences within college, specific times of the day (e.g., lunch and transitions) were hardest, and finally, challenges working with families of their students. Hoffman and Kuvalanka report that the overall sense from participants was that of "frustration because they did not always have the resources and support to adequately address problem behaviors" (p. 264).

Mondi et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study to gain insight into early education teachers' views on challenging behavior and whether they influenced their decisions to expel children from their centers. Researchers interviewed 20 early education teachers in the state of Minnesota (p. 4), with questions seeking answers to uncover the most common challenging behaviors in their classrooms, educators' opinions of what causes challenging behavior, effective strategies, and when educators would feel expulsion was appropriate (p. 4). Through interviews, researchers determined the most common challenging behaviors this group of early educators experienced the most in their classrooms were physical aggression, noncompliance or defiance, and tantrums (p. 9). This group of early educators also believed young children behave in these ways due to typical child development, parenting values, and stressors within the home

environment (p. 10). Mondi et al. (2022) recommended increasing early educators' knowledge of developmentally appropriate behaviors, practical strategies, and support for early educators to decrease their stress levels (pp. 13-15).

Trauma-Sensitive Microsystems

Cole et al. (2005) define trauma-sensitive schools as those that put policies in place ensuring teachers learn how to identify trauma symptoms and how trauma can impact learning; schoolwide infrastructure and culture that supports an environment beginning with top-down buy-in to create a safe environment for all children; building relationships with both children and families and incorporating mental health professionals into the school community. Trauma-sensitive early learning centers should be a foundation in a child's microsystem (Cole et al., 2005; Cole et al., 2013; Post et al., 2020a; Ruprecht et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

To be successful in establishing a trauma-sensitive early learning setting, early education teachers and leaders must understand child development, family systems, and the impact trauma has on learning. Yet, early education teachers and administrators are not required to attend higher education institutions to obtain a college degree in their field to support their work (Ai et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020b; Schaack et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). For example, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) does not require more than a minimum age of 21 years old, one three-credit college-level Child Development course, and nine months of experience working as a teaching assistant to become certified as an early education teacher (Massachusetts Department of Early Education & Care, n.d.).

Shared Understanding of the Impact Trauma Has on Children's Learning

As described in the sections above, early learning centers rest within a child's microsystem. This allows the daily opportunity for early education teachers to form close and positive relationships with their students. However, despite research that supports how to provide optimal early learning experiences for young children, such as a shared understanding of trauma among teachers and leadership, policies, and teacher preparation, barriers exist that prevent ideal relationships from being formed.

Research has shown that a shared understanding of trauma's impact on learning can strengthen a teaching team's ability to teach and support children. A shared understanding refers to the norms and values of the early learning center, including the policies governing day-to-day practices (Cole et al., 2013; Morgan et al., n.d.). Creating a professional learning community among teachers and leadership is critical for this type of structural change to occur. Within a professional learning community, the momentum to continuously reflect on progress and adjust as more is learned is imperative for success. This requires a system-wide buy-in to adopt the urgency to learn and practice new ways of teaching (Atallha et al., 2019; Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Holmes et al., 2015; Loomis, 2018; Morgan et al., n.d.; Ruprecht, 2020; Schaack et al., 2020; Senge et al., 2012).

Although research shows early education teachers expressed improvements in their knowledge, belief, and perception about the impact of trauma on learning after engaging in professional development on the topic of trauma-sensitivity, unfortunately, having a shared understanding is an exception, not the norm. It is rare for early education teachers to have the opportunity to participate in training on this topic (Attwood et al., 2021; Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Post et al., 2020b). In the U.S., only 20% of early education teachers receive formal

professional development training on understanding challenging behaviors, and often these trainings are offered very infrequently (Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Loomis, 2018). This is a critical statistic, considering the impact traumatic experiences have on a young child's developing brain and how those experiences can manifest into externalized and internalized behaviors.

A shared understanding of the impact trauma has on learning allows for early education teaching teams and leadership to slow down when confronted with challenging behavior and consider what the child is trying to communicate through their actions (Cole et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2017; Pianta et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2018; Terrasi, & Crain de Galarce, 2017; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Teaching with a trauma-sensitive belief promotes safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments that can act as a buffer to the impact adversity might be causing in the lives of young children and their families. It allows for a shift in teacher perspective, positively influencing how a teacher interacts with children and their families. A trauma-sensitive perspective will naturally encourage structuring early learning centers as communities of support for families, which can promote overall family well-being. This would include a shared understanding of the many family cultures and dynamics intertwined into each daily interaction (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Eismann et al., 2020; Ziv et al., 2021). Early learning centers that encourage a shared understanding amongst their team will provide an environment where relationships can be more easily developed.

A focus on supporting early education teachers in developing the capacity to respond to challenging behaviors has been studied in empirical research (Holmes et al., 2015; Lipscomb et al., 2019; Perry & Daniels, 2016; Snell et al., 2012). The following studies demonstrate the need

for ongoing in-depth professional development to increase shared understanding, with opportunities for feedback, collaborative problem-solving, and trauma-sensitive support.

Snell et al. (2012) studied educators' understanding of and response to challenging behaviors in the Mid-Atlantic area of the United States. Researchers surveyed 78 early education staff between five Head Start programs to determine strategies to support children displaying challenging behavior. Staff included teachers, administrators, and mental health consultants. The average time working in the field among respondents was six years. Staff all reported having some form of licensure endorsement, with 33% in early childhood education, 10% in elementary education, 9% in early childhood special education, and 3% in special education. Children in these classrooms were average ages three to five years old (p. 100).

Researchers used the Social Competence in Preschool Survey to determine staff experiences with challenging classroom behavior. The survey design included open-ended questions and demographic information (Snell et al., p. 100). Snell et al. (2012) determined that despite reporting having participated in some form of professional development over the last year before the study on topics of behavior management and positive behavior support, analysis from the survey showed staff roughly defined challenging behavior and were not able to determine which children needed individualized intentional support versus children who were behaving in a developmentally appropriate way. Snell et al. (2012) suggest that these results indicate the need for providing more in-depth training to early education staff, including knowledge building of child development and modeling and practice of implementing individualized strategies for children displaying challenging behavior (p. 104).

In another study, Lipscomb et al. (2019) piloted a trauma-responsive training program for early education teachers in center- and home-based early learning settings in response to the

prevalence of the maltreatment of young children and the lack of attention the early education field has received for training and other supports for teachers of at-risk children. This study examined the impact the Roots of Resilience online trauma-responsive training program would have on early education teachers' knowledge and skills to support at-risk children. Seventeen teachers from different early learning centers participated in the study. The average length of teachers in the field was 53.13 months, with nearly half, or 41%, holding a bachelor's degree, 35% holding an associate degree, and 24% holding a high school diploma (p. 4).

The Roots of Resilience online program has two components. There are six self-paced online modules focused on trauma and resilience, the impact trauma has on development, using a trauma-informed perspective with instruction, building relationships with children and their families, guiding behavior, and self-regulation. The second component includes coaching for the teachers. Teachers film themselves teaching, upload the video to a software program, and then receive feedback regarding serve-and-return interactions between teacher and child as well as child and teacher regulation.

Lipscomb et al. (2019) analyzed this pilot program's results and found it helpful to the participants. The technology component was easy to use, the time to complete the program was feasible, and overall, participants showed an improved understanding of creating a trauma-responsive environment. Lipscomb et al. (2019) acknowledged the limitations of this study in terms of size and racial diversity in teachers. However, although preliminary, this study shows promise for future research and practical trauma-responsive training for early education teachers (p. 9). This study also highlights that even with higher education obtained, if topics specific to teaching with trauma-sensitivity are not addressed, teachers may continue to enter the field ill-

prepared. Combining professional development with collaborative problem-solving shows promise.

Holmes et al. (2015) reported findings from the Head Start Trauma Smart (HSTS) intervention program designed for young children enrolled in Head Start programs. The HSTS pilot program included 150 children with an average age of 4.25 years. All Head Start staff were trained in the Attention, Self-Regulation, and Competency Model (ARC), developed by Blaustein and Kinniburgh (2019). Enrolled children who were identified through parent surveys to have known traumatic experiences and met with mental health therapists. Therapists were also available to meet with classroom teachers to offer coaching. Ongoing professional learning was the last branch of this model, encouraging teachers and center directors to meet regularly to brainstorm and share successes and challenges. Holmes et al. reported that HSTS marked positive improvements in a decrease in children's externalizing behavior; however, this approach needs continued research.

Successful professional development goes beyond a train-the-teachers model. Perry and Daniels (2016) reviewed the pilot program, The New Haven Trauma Coalition (NHTC), in Connecticut, which was created in response to the prevalence of the maltreatment of children and the impact their traumatic experience have on their learning and behavior in classrooms in grades PreK through eight. The model for NHTC was created from research that suggests schools are in an important position within a child's life to buffer the impacts of maltreatment and foster resiliency development (p. 178). NHTC has four components: professional development surrounding a trauma-sensitive approach, identifying students who may benefit from a trauma-sensitive approach, school policies developed to provide trauma-sensitive services, and fostering students' skill sets to cope and respond to stress (p. 179). These four components are

implemented through professional development, partnering with families, and offering a team of clinicians, which could help facilitate relationships between staff and students, school and home, and support continued implementation of trauma-sensitive education.

Although Perry and Daniels (2016) reported some limitations, the data indicate school staff were satisfied with professional development, reported changed attitudes towards their students, families expressed feeling more connected to the school community, and overall, students expressed having more skills for self-regulation and a sense of safety.

There is scant literature surrounding evidence-based intervention strategies for early education teachers to implement in their classrooms to support children displaying challenging behavior (Sheehan et al., 2023). While preliminary data highlights the need for such research to exist, published information focuses on describing the existing widespread issue of the impact of trauma on young children's learning, children's behavior in the classroom because of experiencing adversity, and the ill-equipped early education teachers these children have to support them, suggesting future research should focus the intersection of these areas.

Leadership and Internal Early Learning Center Policies

Research points to leadership considering how they create policies within their organization to support close relationships among teachers and children, a shared understanding among the teaching team, and prevent burnout. Research has shown teacher autonomy, teacher voice, shared vision, and collaboration (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Hur et al., 2016; Ruprecht, 2020; Schaack et al., 2020) lead to increased job satisfaction and increased relational health among early education teachers.

Leadership must recognize how stress can lead to burnout and the implications of a stressed-out teacher. If early education teachers do not feel supported by leadership, this can

cause teachers to bring their emotional exhaustion into their classrooms. Their increased stress can lead to holding more negative perceptions about their students and their students' families, as well as a lack of motivation to connect with children or bring meaningful lessons into the curricula (Blewitt et al., 2020; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Hur et al., 2016). Leadership should consider structuring organizational policies that will keep teacher-child ratios smaller than the state-recommended requirements (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Cooper et al., 2017; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014b; Ziv et al., 2021; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019), clear guidance surrounding how to engage families, and how to respond to children who are displaying challenging behavior (Chen & Phillips, 2018; Westerberg et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Early education teachers who report teaching in an early learning center with these practices in place have a greater sense of community among colleagues, higher job satisfaction, and higher levels of feeling supported by leadership, which in turn, supports teachers in taking risks in their practice and persisting through stressful situations (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Hur et al., 2016; Schaack et al., 2020; Tebben et al., 2021; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

In a recent research project, Garrity et al. (2019) conducted an exploratory, descriptive study to learn more about early learning center directors' practices of addressing challenging behavior across the United States. The authors used the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) database to determine contact information for early learning centers, which held a national accreditation, to participate in the study—of the 6,931 Challenging Behaviors Surveys (p. 172) sent out, 1,427 (21%) of directors responded. Of the responding directors, those directors reported an average of 41% of their students presenting with challenging behaviors. Directors reported various strategies, including using The Pyramid

Model, early childhood mental health consultation, and developmental and behavioral screenings. Directors linked to campus programs and non-profits, such as Head Start, were more likely to utilize evidence-based strategies when compared to for-profit or faith-based programs.

Garrity et al. (2019) also reported that directors named externalizing behaviors more problematic than internalizing behaviors. Results from this study confirmed the variability of support and expectations found from program to program, thus resulting in not only children and families receiving variations in quality but also early education teachers. The authors recommend that leadership needs additional professional development in intervention topics, including working with families.

Within the microsystem of the early learning center, continually considering providing a support system for families and teachers is critical: (a) What resources are available? (b) What job-related or other stressors are being experienced? (c) How is self-care a priority? (d) What are the presumed barriers to engaging in self-care? (e) Is there a team approach to supporting challenging behaviors? (f) How does home subculture impact teacher/family/child response in situations and interpretation of that response? (g) What is the role of leadership in all of this? Ruminating on these outcomes will hold leadership accountable for fostering an environment where relationships can grow.

Burnout: What Leads to Early Educator Stress

Early education teachers have an emotionally and physically taxing job. The turnover rate is 30% annually, with over 50% of early education teachers reporting burnout (Heilala et al., 2022; Pianta et al., 2016; Schaack et al., 2020). Many early education teachers will leave the field within five years (Pianta et al., 2016; p. 128). Ducharme et al. (2007) describe burnout as exhaustion, poor job performance, interpersonal conflict, adverse health outcomes, absenteeism,

job dissatisfaction, depression, irritability, and leaving employment. Many contributing factors cause stress among early education teachers. One of the most critical factors is low wages (Chen & Phillips, 2018; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Martin et al., 2018; Sandilos et al., 2020; Schaack et al., 2020; Stormont & Young-Walker, 2017). According to McLean et al. (2019), in 2017, the U.S. national average yearly income for early education teachers ranged from $22,290 to $28,990. McLean et al. also highlight that the federal poverty level for a family of four in 2017 was $24,600. These salary ranges mean most early education teachers can apply for government aid to support their families at home. The economic stress early education teachers experience in their personal lives may carry over into their professional lives. The inability to earn a livable wage contributes to feeling undervalued and disrespected (Ruprecht, 2020).

Another factor that contributes significantly to early education teacher stress is the lack of support they receive from leadership within their organizations. The lack of support can take many forms, including insufficient support with families or children with challenging behavior, lack of reflective supervision, lack of adequate or meaningful professional development training, and lack of financial resources to purchase new materials (Chen & Phillips, 2018; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Martin et al., 2018; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Recchia, 2012; Ruprecht, 2020; Stormont & Young-Walker, 2017; Williford & Vitiello, 2020). Support can look like attention to teachers' emotional well-being, which would take the form of creating space for early education teachers to take lunch breaks away from children, avenues for self-care, fostering a sense of community through collaboration and harnessing teacher voice, providing adequate time for curriculum preparation, and conducting formal assessments, or providing opportunities for teachers and families to engage and form relationships. Without these provisions as a part of the early learning center culture, the stress level and feelings of isolation among the teaching

team will increase and cause early education teachers to burnout (Hur et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 2016; Ruprecht, 2020; Sandilos et al., 2020; Schaack et al., 2020; Stormont & Young-Walker, 2017; Tebben et al., 2021).

Successful early learning center policies reflect ways to care for teachers as part of the early learning center design, not as separate benefits. Young children require their teachers to model and support their ability to regulate their emotions so that they can access learning opportunities. Children who are English Language Learners, neurodivergent, have chronic health issues, or are experiencing adversity (Schaack et al., 2020) will require higher levels of teacher support. It can be assumed that children born right before or during the COVID-19 pandemic will also require higher levels of teacher support due to the lack of social experiences these children and families were afforded during their critical developmental period.

Yet long work hours, year-round programs, and lack of sufficient training around essential topics such as challenging behavior and trauma, coupled with little resources and large class sizes, cause early education teachers to be physically and emotionally drained within a short time of entering the field and that will severely impact the emotional climate of their classrooms (Chen et al. 2021; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014b; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Post et al., 2020b; Recchia, 2012; Ruprecht, 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Taken all together, if early education teachers burn out from the stress of the job, they will not be capable of forming relationships with their students or their families. The inability to form close relationships with both children and families can lead to children being less engaged in their learning and having fewer opportunities to develop positive relationships with their peers (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Cooper et al., 2017; Jeon et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2019; Sabol et al., 2018; Vu, 2015).

Early Education Teacher Preparation

Only one in five children exposed to three or more ACEs is on track in all domains of school readiness. In other words, children who experience early adversity are less likely to be ready for school (Jackson et al., 2021). One in four children experiences a traumatic event before age three (Douglass et al., 2021). Considering this, the children who display what we would call "challenging behavior" (and all children) can then benefit from a positive and close relationship with their early education teacher to support school readiness and overall developmental outcomes. A close and positive relationship with their early education teacher can provide a safe space to express big emotions and to learn and practice ways to regulate these emotions.

Variability Among Pre-Service Preparation and State Policies

The education and experience requirements to become a certified early education teacher vary incredibly between states within the United States (Bellm et al., 2004; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Pianta et al., 2016). The varying education backgrounds lead to early education teachers and leaders entering the workforce with uneven knowledge of child development, differing definitions of what constitutes quality interactions, and what the impact of trauma is on learning, if even discussed at all. Weisenfeld et al. (2023) illustrate the spectrum of requirements across the U.S. in their detailed report in the International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy. The figure detailing this variability created by Weisenfeld et al. can be found in Appendix F.

The research points to the need for systemic change to improve continuity among states (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019), including early education regulatory system requirements of preservice education for its teachers, including higher degree requirements and focusing on special topics such as understanding how trauma impacts learning, attachment theory, ecological systems (Cooper et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2021; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Lippard et al., 2018; Nguyen et

al., 2020; Recchia, 2012; Vu, 2015; Westerberg et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019), diversity, and equity (Chen et al., 2021; Sabol et al., 2018). Literature highlights the benefits of increasing pre-service education requirements for teachers and those in leadership positions. Tackling similar topics to teachers in addition to issues specific to early education leadership, adult development and learning, and reflective practice (Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Garrity et al., 2019; Recchia, 2012; Schaack et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019) can support leaders in their roles. Research also suggests annual professional development requirements to retain certification on either teacher or leader level, focused on evidence-based instructional strategies, social and emotional learning competencies, mindfulness practices, diversity, equity, and inclusion (Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Doubet & Ostrosky, 2016; Glover Gagnon et al., 2019; Hur et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 2016; Sandilos et al., 2020; Vujnovic et al., 2014; Westling, 2010) is best practice.

In addition to diversity, equity, and inclusion, research highlights the importance of understanding implicit bias and the expulsion and suspension epidemic in preschools across the United States (Gilliam, 2005). Understanding implicit bias and how it can turn up in classrooms can give early education teachers and leaders tools to reflect (e.g., is bias playing a role in decision-making) and shift perceptions of families and children to more positive and supportive (Gilliam, 2005; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Not only will this lead to a decrease in removing young children from early learning centers, but a transformation in thinking about challenging behavior from "it's a child problem" to "it's an adult problem."

An additional barrier to teaching in an environment that encourages close relationships among children, teachers, and families is the extreme variability found among the internal policies within early learning centers across the U.S. This inconsistency is found not only state to

state but between neighborhoods (Ai et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2018; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Pianta et al., 2016; Rucker et al., 2023; Schaack et al., 2020; Stormont & Young-Walker, 2017; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Early education has many avenues through which a child can be educated, including publicly funded preschools, private community-based centers, Head Start, home-based, and faith-based (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Among those individual organizations, there are many funding sources, regulations, and accountability measures (Ai et al., 2022; Rucker et al., 2023).

From one early learning center to the next, an early education teacher will be faced with differing policies surrounding teacher-child interactions, family engagement, and organizational support (Blewitt et al., 2020; Pianta et al., 2016; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Rucker et al., 2023; Schaack et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). The field of early education has yet to reach a consensus on their definition of quality. Quality measures such as the Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) developed through the Rate to the Top Early Learning Challenge in 2010 lack sufficient research to support its standards of quality (Pianta et al., 2016, p. 124). Without clear direction, early education teachers and leadership will continue to offer inconsistent experiences to children and families across the United States (Blewitt et al., 2020; Sabol et al., 2018).

In their 2023 study, Rucker et al. examined pathways for early education credential attainment across all 50 states in the U.S., with a sample size of 2,860 lead teachers. The researchers sought to understand if the state policy stringency predicted the level of education and credentialing a teacher would obtain (p. 557). Rucker et al. reported variability across the country, with some states requiring minimal, if anything, and others requiring a minimum of

a bachelor's degree. After analysis, researchers found the more stringent state policies were, the more likely teachers would obtain a bachelor's degree or higher, state-level certification, or participate in professional development. Still, stringency did not predict earning an associate degree. Rucker et al. also found that teachers who taught in centers receiving PreK funding or were located in a community with high poverty rates were more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher and state-level certification. The authors suggested this might have to do with the increased wages accompanying funding and federal programs such as Head Start requiring more qualifications from its teachers. In conclusion, the authors noted the need for a unified early education policy that supports increased education and wages for its workforce.

Nicholson and Reifel (2011) explored early education teachers' perceptions of their pre-service and in-service training. Their qualitative study included 18 teachers from six for-profit early learning settings across central Texas. Teachers in this study reported having to "sink or swim" (p. 10) due to the lack of pre-service training they received and the lack of on-site training they received. Many teachers reported being "thrown into" (p. 13) the classroom due to the center not having enough staff. Although many of the participants in this study expressed they could learn by watching more experienced coworkers, they were not provided annual training (as required by Texas regulations) or support from their directors. One of their participants remarked:

> Mostly trial and error. For me here, it's not even necessarily a trial and error, it's a sink or swim deal. Because for me, I've been here quite a while and our teachers come and go, like I said earlier, so there is days where I have two different classes, two different ages and just somebody standing in for numbers. And so I'm going to have to take something that I had planned for my class, change it up a little bit and so it's not so much a trial and

> error if it is going to work, it's a this is what I have to do. Or it's going to go really bad really fast" (p. 5).

Nicholson and Reifel (2011) concluded that the results of their study support the need for a cohesive national structure in the early education field and increased pre-service and in-service training for early education teachers.

The U.S. has inadequate policies supporting young children or the early education teachers who teach them. Garrity et al. (2019) refer to the early education system in the U.S. as a "non-system" due to its lack of accountability and cohesiveness (p. 169). As shown throughout this paper, the available research indicates the field of early education can vary from state to state, neighborhood to neighborhood, setting to setting, and teacher to teacher. Due to this extreme variability, children are greeted by teachers who may or may not have a solid understanding of child development, individualized instruction, or how to create a safe and supportive learning environment.

Addressing Mental Health

Research points to the importance of considering the mental health of teachers and children within individual organizations and policy decisions. Teaching young children is a physically and emotionally draining job. Although this profession can be fulfilling, as the literature has illustrated, long hours, low wages, and little respect wear on early education teachers' abilities to continue teaching in the field. Literature would suggest system-wide policies to support individual organizations with funding needed to provide mental health consultation for young children and be accessible for teachers are best practice (Connors-Burrows et al., 2017; Hur et al., 2016; Sandilos et al., 2020; Schaack et al., 2020). Early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) is available in Massachusetts. Still, early education leadership needs to

(a) know about the free service and (b) the early childhood mental health consultation provider needs space to add additional clients[1]. Providing early education teachers with care for themselves and the emotional climate within their classrooms will help teachers feel supported and heard, and that will create a more positive work environment, which will decrease turnover and decrease the number of suspensions and expulsions of young children (Hur et al., 2016; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

Contribution to the Literature

The studies reviewed indicate the need to understand better the perspective of early education teachers on challenging behaviors and their impact on their relationships. The available literature sheds light on the importance of relationships in early learning centers and shares the critical need to examine policies that dictate early education teacher preparation programs, unveil mental health issues, and re-think how the U.S. can better support the teachers who teach the youngest and most vulnerable students. There is a gap in research surrounding using trauma-sensitive strategies with young children enrolled in early education. The research findings show the positive impact of multifaceted interventions and professional development on early education teachers' responses to challenging behaviors. These studies also indicate a common theme that early education teachers need more preparation for teaching with a trauma-sensitive approach.

The research conducted in the present study brings an opportunity to bridge the existing gap in the literature by exploring the perceptions preschool teachers hold of young children who display challenging behavior. Understanding these everyday experiences may help to shape

[1] Jewish Family & Children Services (JF&CS) and Justice Resource Institute (JRI) offer ECMHC in Massachusetts

future pilot studies implementing early education trauma-sensitive models and to inform future teacher preparatory programs and training.

Chapter Summary

Relationships matter. Throughout the literature, it is clear how impactful the relationship is between a child and their attachment figure. In an early learning center, a child spends an immense amount of time with their teacher. A teacher who can promote a sense of safety and belonging with each child should see an increase in children's engagement, exploration, and risk-taking, all of which are vital to healthy development.

The research highlighted within this literature review shows clear connections between a child's physiological responses and traumatic experiences. In summary, neuroscience focuses on the critical, sensitive developmental period between birth and five years old. Potentially traumatic events impact can impact brain organization and children's ability to reach their full potential. Disruptions to this brain organization can have devastating effects, affecting a child's learning and their journey through life. Research in this field gives educators and policymakers a better understanding of child development and, therefore, ways in which we can protect young children and support their ability to develop resiliency. A critical piece to this is the early learning center and supporting a close relationship between an early education teacher and a child. The best way to provide a high-quality, safe, and supportive early learning milieu is to educate teachers on how to build warm and responsive relationships with children.

Chapter Three: Methods and Procedures

Having high expectations for your students is imperative. Whether or not you're aware of it, your expectations of each child guide what and how you teach her, and your behavior in the classroom quickly reveals your feelings. ~ Barbara Kaiser & Judy Sklar Rasminksy

In this chapter, I explain the methods and procedures used during the analysis phase of this research project. I outline how the methodological design choices support my quest in answering the guiding research questions: (1) *What are preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behavior within their classrooms?* and (2) *How does challenging behavior impact relationships between children and teachers in an early learning setting?*

In the following sections, I will describe the survey respondents and interview participants and discuss recruitment procedures and instruments used in data collection. Next, I will explain the quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis employed in the study, including steps taken to improve the validity and trustworthiness of inferences made from the data. The chapter will conclude with a section highlighting the delimitations and limitations of this study.

Design of the Study

The design of this study was intended to capture preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behavior in their classrooms and how behavior may impact relationships within the classroom. I approached this research study using a sequential mixed methods design with a phenomenological style, which allowed me to explore and explain the everyday experiences of the preschool teachers who participated in this study. According to Leavy (2017), social research supports the quest to understand the world around us and how we move through

it. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), phenomenological methodology includes a minimum of three participants in focus groups or interviews, which was a consideration in participant recruitment. Quantitative methods are typically used to explain or evaluate an area of inquiry, and qualitative methods are usually used to gain a more profound knowledge of experiences (Leavy, 2017).

Therefore, using this sequential mixed methods design, the richness of quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data will underscore and contextualize the prevalence of experiences with challenging behavior in preschool classrooms and its impact on relationships within this small sample of preschool teachers.

Study Participants

Participant Recruitment

I gathered contact information for 100 early learning centers in Plymouth County, Massachusetts, using the Department of Early Education & Care (EEC) of Massachusetts online database to recruit preschool teachers and teaching assistants to participate in this study. I identified all licensed "large group" centers within Plymouth County. EEC assigns the label "large group" for early learning centers that (a) have over nine children, (b) are operating out of the home, and (c) do not serve school-age children. Once I identified all large group early learning centers within Plymouth County, I contacted the Boston EEC licensing office to confirm all centers listed on their database were in "good standing." If a center is in "good standing," it means that the center has an active license and there are no "holds" or "freezes" against their license, which would indicate there has been a severe infraction. EEC confirmed the centers I identified were in good standing.

I called each early learning center and introduced myself to the director (see Appendix E) before distributing surveys via email for directors to share with any preschool teachers and teaching assistants they had on staff. The survey was designed for confidentiality via an encrypted web-based software, SurveySparrow. The survey respondents could voluntarily share their contact information if they volunteered for a follow-up interview.

The criteria for survey respondents included (1) teaching preschool-age children (2.9-5 years old) and (2) holding the perspective that they teach children with challenging behavior.

Survey Participants. In response to the 100 early learning centers contacted 75 surveys were attempted. Of the 75 attempted surveys, 30 (40%) were completed in full and met the abovementioned criteria. The 45 invalid surveys were attempted by a director/administrator, infant/toddler teacher/assistant, and two preschool teachers who reported they did not experience teaching children with challenging behavior. As this study aimed to understand preschool teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviors and the potential impact that behavior has on relationships, these surveys were eliminated from the data set.

Demographic information collected from survey respondents included years in the field, weekly work hours, and the highest level of education achieved; optional questions included race and gender. Of the survey respondents, 93.33% identified themselves as preschool teacher/lead teacher, and 6.67% identified as preschool teaching assistants. Most respondents (19) reported teaching for ten or more years (63.33.4%), with five respondents reporting 7-10 years (16.67%) and four reporting 3-6 years (13.33%). The remaining (6.67%) reported teaching between 0-2 years. More than half of survey respondents reported holding a degree; ten (33.33%) have a master's degree, and ten (33.33%) hold a bachelor's degree. Five (16.67%) survey respondents hold an associate degree, three (10%) survey respondents reported attending some college, one

(3.33%) participated in a vocational program, and one (3.33%) holds a high school diploma. Two-thirds or 66% percent of survey respondents report teaching full-time, with the remaining 34% report teaching part-time. Of those who chose to answer the optional question regarding race, 23 respondents (100%) identified as white. Twenty-nine respondents identified their gender, with 28 (96.5%) identifying as female and one (3.5%) identifying as male. Survey respondents' demographic information is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Survey participants' demographic information

Participant	Position	Experience with challenging behavior	Weekly Work hours	Years in field	Education level	Race	Gender
1	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	20	10+	Bachelor's degree	White	Female
2	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	7-10	Bachelor's degree	White	
3	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	7-10	Vocation program	White	Female
4	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	38	10+	Bachelor's degree		Female
5	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	39	10+	Bachelor's degree	White	Female
6	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	65	10+	Bachelor's degree		Female
7	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	37	3-6	Bachelor's degree	White	Male
8	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	28	10+	Associate degree	White	Female
9	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	10+	Some college	White	Female
10	Preschool Teaching Assistant	Yes	39	0-2	High school	White	Female
11	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	10+	Master's degree		Female

12	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	10+	Associate degree	White	Female
13	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	10+	Bachelor's degree	White	Female
14	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	20	3-6	Master's degree	White	Female
15	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	30	10+	Master's degree		Female
16	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	20	7-10	Master's degree	White	Female
17	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	39	7-10	Master's degree	White	Female
18	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	10+	Master's degree	White	Female
19	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	30	0-2	Some college	White	Female
20	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	30	10+	Master's degree	White	Female
21	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	28	10+	Master's degree		Female
22	Preschool Teaching Assistant	Yes	35	10+	Bachelor's degree	White	Female
23	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	10+	Bachelor's degree	White	Female
24	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	10+	Associate degree	White	Female
25	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	3-6	Bachelor's degree		Female
26	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	20	10+	Master's degree	White	Female
27	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	7	10+	Associate degree	White	Female
28	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	7-10	Master's degree		Female
29	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	48	10+	Associate degree	White	Female
30	Preschool Teacher/Lead Teacher	Yes	40	3-6	Some college	White	Female

Interview Participants. A total of six survey respondents (20%) agreed to volunteer to participate in a follow-up interview to share their perspectives on challenging behavior. Of these six, all identified as white, five as female, and one as male. All identified as preschool lead teachers or teachers.

Three volunteers withdrew their participation from the interview phase. Within the final sample of three interview participants, all reported holding degrees; two (66%) have a bachelor's degree, and one (34%) holds a master's degree. The same holds true for their time teaching, with two (66%) reporting part-time and working 3-6 years in the field and one (34%) reporting full-time and ten or more years in the field. All three volunteers identified as white, with two (66%) identifying as female and one (34%) identifying as male. All identified as preschool teachers/lead teachers. The final interview participants' demographic information can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Interview Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	Experience with challenging behavior	Work hours	Years in field	Education level	Race	Gender
7	Yes	37	3-6	Bachelor's degree	White	Male
14	Yes	20	3-6	Master's degree	White	Female
20	Yes	30	10+	Master's degree	White	Female

Data Collection Methods

Data Collection Procedure

One hundred early learning centers within Plymouth County, MA, received a recruitment phone call and an email link to the online survey. The survey included informed consent

permission. There was minimal risk of harm to participants who contributed to this research study. The identity of survey and interview responses will not be shared publicly. Details that could identify the preschool teacher or early learning center where they are employed were removed from data. Participants were reminded that involvement is voluntary and could be withdrawn anytime. Pseudonyms were used in transcribing interview data to maintain confidentiality.

During the scheduled interview, I verbally acknowledged to participants I had received their Informed Consent Forms. I reminded them that their participation was strictly voluntary and that they could withdraw anytime. I introduced myself to them, reviewed the purpose of the study, and then proceeded through the interview protocol (see Appendix C). During and after the interviews, I engaged in "memoing" (Leavy, 2017, p. 136), which allowed me to identify significant statements or meaning units (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Quantitative Instrument: Survey Protocol

The quantitative tool used in this study was a survey designed to gather information regarding participants' experiences with challenging behaviors in preschool classrooms. It was intended to be completed in less than ten minutes (see Appendix A). The survey had three parts. The first part of the survey was demographic information.

The second part was the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) Short Form (Pianta, 2001a). The STRS Short Form is a 15-question survey designed to gather "information about the social processes that exist in the classroom" (Pianta, 2001b, p. 33). The questions are intended as a Likert scale of 1- 5, with 1 being "definitely does not apply" and 5 being "definitely applies". Refer to Appendix A for the complete STRS Short Form.

The STRS Short Form is a standardized and validated tool that has been used in several research projects across the field (Glover Gagnon et al., 2019; Hamre et al., 2008; Jerome et al., 2009; Loomis et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2020; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Stensen et al., 2023). The tool used in this survey is to understand the perceived relationship or closeness and conflict between a teacher and a student (Pianta, 2001b). The developer's definition of closeness and conflict between student and teacher can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Student-Teacher Relationship Scale Short Form Subscale Indicators

Conflict Subscale	The Conflict subscale measures the degree to which a teacher perceives their relationship with a particular student as negative and conflictual. High conflict scores indicate that the teacher struggles with the student, perceives the student as angry or unpredictable, and consequently the teacher feels emotionally drained and believes they are ineffective (Pianta, 2001b). Conflict subscale raw scores range from 7 to 35. The mean of subscale scores is used.
Closeness Subscale	The Closeness subscale measures the degree to which a teacher experiences affection, warmth, and open communication with a particular student. High closeness scores indicate that the relationship is characterized by warmth, and the teacher believes they are effective because the student uses the teacher as a source of support. High closeness scores also reflect a greater sense of knowing on behalf of the teacher that the student is well and the student can effectively use the teacher as a resource. (Pianta, 2001b). Closeness subscale raw scores range from 8 to 40, note that Item 4 is reverse scored). The mean of subscale scores is used.

Note. These subscale analysis indicators come from Pianta, R. C. (2001b). *Student-teacher relationship scale: Professional manual*. Psychological Assessment Resources.

The third part of the survey focused on common behavior attributes early education teachers report in their classrooms. Survey respondents were asked to identify the top five behavior attributes they see in their classrooms from a list of behaviors (see Appendix A for a complete list of behaviors) and rate the frequency in which they believe those behaviors occur. The rating system for the common behavior attributes was designed to be similar to the STRS

Short Form. Survey respondents used a Likert scale of 1 – 5, with 1 being "never a problem" and 5 being "always a problem".

Survey Distribution. An average of five identified early learning centers were called within each of the twenty-two towns in Plymouth County (Abington, Bridgewater, Brockton, Carver, Duxbury, East Bridgewater, Halifax, Hanover, Hanson, Hingham, Hull, Kingston, Lakeville, Marion, Marshfield, Mattapoisett, Middleboro, Norwell, Pembroke, Plymouth, Plympton, Rochester, Rockland, Scituate, Wareham, West Bridgewater, Whitman).

Over three business days, calls were made to each identified early learning center to introduce this research project and elicit the director's help in distributing the survey to any preschool staff they employed (see Appendix E). Fourteen directors declined to participate, and 36 centers did not answer. Centers that did not answer the phone prompted me to leave a voicemail and email the survey to the email address listed on the EEC database. Two emails bounced back; 64 directors agreed to distribute the survey. Due to 14 directors declining and two emails bouncing back, 16 additional early learning centers were randomly selected to contact. Those 16 centers are factored into the total numbers listed above.

After receiving completed surveys for two weeks, 25 randomly selected early learning centers were contacted a second time via email, with the request to send out the survey to any preschool teacher or teaching assistant on staff. The survey link was open for completed surveys to register from start to finish for four weeks.

Qualitative Instrument: Interview Protocol. A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C) was designed to collect qualitative data. Using an interview as the primary research instrument allowed participants to describe their experiences with children who demonstrate challenging behaviors and how those experiences have shaped their understanding of challenging

behavior and its impacts (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Interview questions were designed to uncover participants' perceptions of children's challenging behaviors, how prepared participants felt to teach children with challenging behaviors, and who participants felt was impacted by this behavior within the classroom. The interviews provided context behind participant answers to survey questions and provided a deeper understanding of individual belief systems held by participants.

Management of Time and Data

The process of gathering data occurred within a natural timeline. I began by creating a draft of the survey to be used in SurveySparrow as I awaited IRB approval so that edits could be made promptly. I also collected the contact information of 100 early learning centers before IRB approval, so once I received approval, I could immediately call EEC to confirm these early learning centers were in "good standing" and begin making phone calls.

The SurveySparrow survey link was open for completion for four weeks, although there were no additional respondents during the fourth week. Although I immediately contacted interested volunteers for the follow-up interview, the timeline from initial contact to conducting the Zoom interviews was seven weeks.

Data collected during the interviews were audio and video recorded via the Zoom platform and saved to the researcher's Lesley University student Zoom account. The written memos taken during interviews and subsequently throughout the coding process are kept in a locked desk. The collected survey and interview data are stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and will be destroyed in five years.

The quantitative analysis of data began once all the survey responses were collected. I started the qualitative analysis after the interviews were conducted. All participants in this study

were given contact information for IRB, myself, and my Senior Advisor should they have questions or concerns during the research process.

Data Analysis

The following section describes the steps used to understand the data collected and to answer the study's guiding research questions. I first embarked on a quantitative analysis of the survey data, then used qualitative methods to analyze the interview data, and lastly, layered both survey and interview data in a mixed methods analysis.

Quantitative Analysis

Top Five Behavior Attributes

To answer guiding research question one, *What are preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behavior within their classrooms?* A quantitative analysis of the third part of the survey regarding common behavior attributes experienced in participants' classrooms was conducted.

To analyze the top five behavior attributes survey respondents experienced within their classrooms, I calculated frequencies of each behavior attribute using SPSS version 29.0.2.0 software (SPSS), determining frequencies for survey respondents (n=30) and interview participants (n=3).

Student-Teacher Relationship Scale. To answer guiding research question two, *How does challenging behavior impact relationships between children and teachers in an early learning setting?* A quantitative analysis of the STRS Short Form answers was completed.

STRS Short Form answers were scored using the STRS Professional Manual (Pianta, 2001b) as recommended by the developer. Subscale mean scores from the STRS Short Form

provided information on the level of conflict and closeness that the respondents were experiencing with a particular student.

To analyze these data, I first used Excel to compute raw conflict and closeness subscales scores for each survey respondent. Using Excel, I then found the mean of the raw scores for each subscale as recommended by the developer (Pianta, 2001b). The raw score range for conflict is 7-35. I divided each survey respondent's raw conflict score by the number of corresponding conflict questions (7) to determine their mean score on a 1 – 5 scale. The raw score for closeness is 8-40. I divided each survey respondent's raw closeness score by the number of corresponding closeness questions (8) to determine their mean score on a 1 – 5 scale.

During the next round of analysis, the demographic variables were converted to ranking variables to compare STRS Short Form mean scores and behavior attribute ratings. I converted the *education level* variable to a ranking of 1 – 5 (high school = 1, some college/vocation = 2, associate degree = 3, bachelor's degree = 4, master's degree = 5). I did the same for *years in the field* variable (0-2 years = 1, 3-6 years = 2, 7-10 years = 3, 10+ years = 4). I assigned values to gender, with female as 1 and male as 2.

SPSS was used to calculate frequencies, descriptives, and Pearson correlation coefficient from survey responses (n=30) to explore a possible relationship between closeness and conflict mean scores. Next, I created a scatter plot with mean scores of both conflict and closeness from the survey sample (n=30). Lastly, I reviewed the information provided in the frequencies, descriptives, and Pearson correlation coefficient tests for outliers and trends.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis was conducted on data collected through interviews. These data provided answers to the first guiding research question, *What are preschool teachers' perceptions*

of children's challenging behavior within their classrooms, and the second guiding research question, *How does challenging behavior impact relationships between children and teachers in an early learning setting?*

Zoom, Memoing, and Transcripts

During and immediately following each Zoom call, I engaged in memoing to stay reflexive and to ensure I was bracketing any biases I had coming into this process. Interview transcriptions were listened to for accuracy three times to ensure nuances of the interview conversations and exact transcriptions had been recorded. After completing this step, each participant was emailed individually to ask additional clarifying questions. Participants were given exact quotes from their statements that needed clarification with accompanying questions.

In Vivo Coding. During the first coding round, the' splitting' method was used. Splitting is the process of going through the transcript line by line and writing down or circling significant words or phrases (Saldaña, 2021, p. 34). These words and phrases became In Vivo codes. After this first read-through, full transcripts were converted into three separate transcripts in Word so that each participant had their statements individually organized.

During the second round of analysis, coding moved towards 'lumping' (Saldaña, 2021, p. 35) of the In Vivo codes. Transcripts were analyzed stanza by stanza, with notes made regarding significant words and phrases and the essence of what participants were expressing.

Following this, initial categories from In Vivo codes were created. Under the initial categories, In Vivo codes were moved and reorganized to fall under those categories within the Word documents. If an In Vivo code fell under two or more categories, subscript numbers were added to connect codes throughout the document. During this step, repetitive words or phrases

were highlighted. This process was repeated several times to collapse initial codes into more prominent themes.

Emotion Coding. In the last round of analysis, a form of affective coding, emotion coding, was used. Emotion coding is a method that supports the investigation of personal experiences, "identity, [and] social relationships" (Saldaña (2021, p. 160). Using both guiding research questions to reorganize In Vivo codes, feelings, and emotional states were assigned to these codes. Conclusive themes and significant findings emerged during this final phase of analysis.

Mixed Methods Data Analysis

The third stage of analysis included the integration of quantitative and qualitative data. During this stage, an analysis of the comparability of data sets was completed (Leavy, 2017). First, the STRS analysis and frequencies of behavior attributes chosen by survey respondents (n=30) and interview participants (n=3) were reviewed. Next, comparison of frequent words used by interview participants to describe children's behavior were compared to the common behavior attributes they chose within their survey answers, followed by comparing interview participants' closeness and conflict mean scores and chosen common behavior attributes to closeness and conflict mean scores and chosen common behavior attributes from all survey respondents (n=30).

These data richly explain how this specific group of preschool teachers perceive challenging behaviors and how this behavior impacts relationships within their classrooms. In the following chapter, themes and significant findings are discussed at length.

Ethical Considerations

Validity

Holding the professional position of teacher, coach, administrator in early education, and researcher created an unintentional power differential between myself and the participants. I removed any identifying information from my emails (e.g., my email signature stating my education level and professional role) and chose to recruit participants from a county that I neither live nor work in. I entered this study with an insider status and had to be aware of how my personal experiences may influence my interpretation of the data.

I assumed participants would not have a comprehensive understanding of trauma-sensitive teaching. I also believe preschool teachers can be influenced by a "group think" mentality, often coming to know and understand children's behavior through their interactions with coworkers and their larger organizational culture. To support the analysis of teacher perspectives not skewed by my assumptions, I used memos and member checks as I moved through the study, including confirming agreement with my findings with interview participants.

There was minimal risk of harm to participants who contributed to this research study. Details that could identify participants, early learning centers, or students were removed from data. I used pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. I reiterated that participation in this study was voluntary at the start of recording interview sessions.

Data analysis is more confident when multiple ways are used to collect data, such as through the survey instrument and interview protocol (Leavy, 2017). I chose three colleagues to review the Interview Protocol to ensure inter-rater reliability. I asked each colleague to rate the questions on a scale of 1-10 (1 being the least reliable, 10 being the most reliable). With these ratings, I multiplied the average by 10 to gain a percentage of reliability. The first round of

testing inter-rater reliability resulted in 80% agreement, which caused me to reevaluate the Interview Protocol. After adjusting, 100% agreement was achieved. I repeated this process with a pilot survey before distribution. Four colleagues took the survey to ensure any technical design flaws were worked out and to gain their perspective on the directions that were easy to follow. After receiving feedback, adjustments were made to the survey design. My colleagues completed the survey again and reached 100% agreement the survey was easy to complete.

Trustworthiness of Analysis

As I noted above, I entered this research project with insider status. I had to be aware of how this perspective might influence my thinking and analysis of data. I used memos throughout the collection and analysis process to bring awareness to held assumptions and note significant participant statements.

During interviews with participants, I would pause the discussion to clarify statements or words they used. I did this to avoid assuming I knew what they meant by using these phrases. I felt this was an essential step to member check in the moment and not to bring my assumptions into the conversation.

Delimitations and Limitations. Delimitations of this study include its design to incorporate only preschool teachers or preschool teaching assistants in one focused region of Massachusetts within the sample. This research project aimed to understand preschool teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviors and the potential impact that behavior has on relationships. Therefore, this study excluded early education professionals who identified as director/administrator or, infant/toddler teacher/assistant, or preschool teachers and assistants who reported not having any experience with challenging behavior. The experiences of these other groups are meaningful but not within the scope of this study. The survey design included a

forced sample of common behavior attributes for survey respondents to select from; therefore, there may have been more behaviors that survey respondents experienced but could not indicate on this survey.

What was also beyond the scope of this study was collecting data on the emotional climate of participants' classrooms and their students' social and emotional development, which could add richness to data collected but was outside the feasibility of this project. Lastly, another limitation is the number of participants in this study, which argues the generalizability of the results.

Chapter Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I described the path I took to capture and analyze preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behavior in their classrooms and the impact on their relationships. Data analysis uncovered four themes and three significant findings that answered both guiding research questions. The following chapter will discuss these themes and significant findings in depth.

Chapter Four: Significant Findings

Children act the way they do because they're children. To get angry at them because they're acting the way children act, makes little sense. ~ Dr. David Almeida

Although it makes little sense to get angry when children display challenging behaviors, it can be hard not to feel frustrated. Preschool teachers who participated in this study help us understand their perceptions of behavior, and even with an understanding of child development, barriers impact how they can effectively teach. Within this chapter, I explore the perceptions held by preschool teachers teaching in community-based early learning centers in Plymouth County and share salient themes and exciting findings that emerged from my research.

In the following sections, I illustrate three themes I discovered when answering my first guiding research question: *What are preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behavior within their classrooms?* The first theme emerged: *"They just won't do it".* This theme highlights the reoccurrence of using "defiance" and the frequency with which these teachers experience this behavior. The second theme emerged: *"Other kids need attention too*." This theme explains how these teachers feel when they do not have enough time to provide all children the individualized attention, they need due to the attention teachers need to provide children with challenging behavior. The third theme that emerged is: *"They're so young*". This theme underscores why teachers believe challenging behavior occurs, highlighting the sources as environmental or biological, not by the child's choice.

One large theme with one subcategory emerged in answering my second guiding research question: *How does challenging behavior impact relationships between children and preschool teachers in an early learning setting?* This theme, *"It's exhausting*," reflects the feelings of

burnout and personal defeat these teachers experience when they cannot adequately support children. The subcategory, *Teachers' energy impacts the classroom community*, illustrates how teachers' negative internal thoughts can influence children's behavior and interactions between family members and teachers.

Three significant findings emerged from the data. The first major finding, *Preschool teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach children with challenging behavior*, reflects the interview participants' feelings of not entering the field prepared nor receiving meaningful professional development since entering the field. Finding two, *preschool teachers' feelings of isolation influence their ability to teach children with challenging behavior*, which emerged through the theme that answered guiding research question two. These teachers' feelings of personal defeat and burnout stemmed from not having the support they needed to teach effectively. Finding three, *when preschool teachers feel a sense of connectedness, their success, and satisfaction in the classroom increase*, which emerged from the points in the conversation when interview participants discussed what helped them to feel and be successful and how strongly others influence their work. Finally, I conclude the chapter by summarizing the themes and significant findings from the data.

Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Children's Challenging Behavior

In the following section, I describe what analysis brought to the forefront when answering the first guiding research question: *What are preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behavior within their classrooms?* The data supports a descriptive definition of what behaviors interview participants Zoe, Tom, and Meredith consider challenging; they discuss extreme cases and behaviors from a developmental lens. I also compare those definitions and experiences with the quantitative data from survey respondents.

What Makes Behavior Challenging?

What intrigued me the most about my conversations with Zoe, Tom, and Meredith was the overall direction and how they expressed their perceptions of children's challenging behavior in their classrooms. They all agreed that challenging behaviors are common across early learning centers, that there is variation in *how* challenging those behaviors are, and *which* behaviors they found challenging. Tom described how challenging behaviors could vary in severity, explaining,

> *I think that you will see at least one challenging behavior in each early childhood setting…I know I talked about defiance, which is, to me is, a mild challenging behavior, versus biting or hurting other children, which is more serious challenging behavior.*

The overall perception from these preschool teachers is that challenging behaviors are difficult to manage. Reflecting on this, Tom expressed, *"If I have to bring a child to say the office because they're just too much, and they're causing so much disruption to the day, you know?"* Throughout the conversations, all three participants referenced challenging behaviors as ones that are *"ongoing"* or on a *"regular basis"* or are typically the *"same children"* engaging in them. For example, Meredith perceives challenging behavior as,

> *I would say, you know, that challenging behaviors are behaviors that, for me, are like behavior that is difficult to predict or manage…I think it's behaviors that are not easily remedied by like a redirection or you know, distraction, or reminders.*

Tom added to her point by sharing,

> *When I think of challenging behavior, I think of behaviors that are difficult for teachers to manage…that the child's behavior causes the teacher to feel overwhelmed, and they feel that they aren't doing enough to help; therefore, the child being too much for the teacher to handle.*

"They just won't do it."

Challenging behaviors most discussed in the interviews were ways students imposed their autonomy. As described in the analysis below, this behavior was perceived as defiant, a disruption to the classroom, and more common than acts of aggression. Zoe explained the varying severity of student behavior, sharing, *"I mean, I just feel really lucky that we don't; I don't have to deal with more challenging behaviors."*

Study participants were asked to complete questions in the survey to identify behavioral attributes. Table 3 shows the top five behavior attributes chosen by interviewed participants Zoe, Tom, and Meredith. To show the variation between the larger sample of survey respondents (n=30) and the smaller sample of interview participants (n=3), I included *taking out of turn* in Table 3 as it was a top five behavior chosen amongst survey respondents but not interview participants. Table 3 highlights the frequent behavior attributes of *impulsive, defiance* and *needs high levels of teacher support,* which Zoe, Tom, and Meredith discussed in their interviews.

Survey respondents (n=30) also chose *needs high levels of teacher support*, *needy, and defiance;* however, other similarities between Zoe, Tom, and Meredith and the whole sample were more scattered.

The top five common behavior attributes chosen by survey respondents (n=30) were *needs high levels of teacher support, impulsive, defiant, needy,* with *talking out of turn,* and *too much energy,* ranking the same in the fifth spot as shown in Table 4. Out of the fourteen behavior attributes survey respondents (n=30) had to choose from, *impulsive* was the most frequent, with 19 respondents (54.3%) selecting it. Of those respondents, 37.1% rated impulsive as four or higher, indicating it was often a problem in their classroom. In interviews, Zoe, Tom, and

Table 3

Top Five Common Behavior Attributes Chosen by Interview Participants

	Needs High levels of teacher support	Frequency	Percent		Impulsive	Frequency	Percent
Valid	3	1	34	Valid	3	1	33
	5	2	66		5	1	33
	Total	3	100		Total	2	66
	Defiant	Frequency	Percent		Needy	Frequency	Percent
Valid	5	1	34	Valid	3	3	100
	Total	1	34		Total	3	100
	Talking out of turn	Frequency	Percent		Too much energy	Frequency	Percent
Valid	Total	0	0	Valid	5	1	34
					Total	1	34

Note. Interview participants (n = 3). Scores range from 1 – 5, ranging from "Never a problem" (1) to "Always a problem" (5).

Meredith discussed impulsiveness not as a perceived negative but as appropriate. Meredith illustrates this sentiment well, saying,

> *And the impulsivity is, I mean there's kids that you know, like they need to touch, or they need to push, or they just see somebody's work, and they have to go up and knock it down or destroy it. And it's like you know, it's a lot of times it's like, there isn't like a, you know, maliciousness behind it or anything. It's just they can't control that impulsivity*.

Zoe expressed a similar perspective, adding,

> *And then impulsivity, I think, is just like, when kids take things just a little bit too far like, or if you know, someone wants to play with a toy that they have, they'll grab it, or they'll you know, like push someone to get something. Or it could be like, we have boys with older brothers who decide that they want to wrestle...or even you know, girls who like to*

like hug people and knock them over. You know it's, it's not always it, it's they're just being impulsive, but has outcomes that aren't positive.

Table 4

Top Five Behavior Attributes Chosen by Survey Respondents

	Needs High levels of teacher support	Frequency	Percent		Impulsive	Frequency	Percent
Valid	2	1	2.9	Valid	2	1	2.9
	3	2	5.7		3	5	14.3
	4	4	11.4		4	6	17.1
	5	7	20.0		5	7	20.0
	Total	14	40.0		Total	19	54.3
	Defiant	Frequency	Percent		Needy	Frequency	Percent
Valid	2	1	2.9	Valid	1	1	2.9
	3	3	8.6		2	1	2.9
	4	5	14.3		3	6	17.1
	5	7	20.0		4	7	20.0
	Total	16	45.7		5	3	8.6
					Total	18	51.4
	Talking out of turn	Frequency	Percent		Too much energy	Frequency	Percent
Valid	3	1	2.9	Valid	3	3	8.6
	4	6	17.1		4	6	17.1
	5	5	14.3		5	3	8.6
	Total	12	34.3		Total	12	34.3

Note. Survey respondents (n = 30). Scores range from 1 – 5, ranging from "Never a problem" (1) to "Always a problem" (5).

Needy was the second most frequently chosen, with 18 respondents (51.4%) selecting this attribute. Of those respondents, 28.6% rated needy as four or higher. All three interview participants chose the behavior attribute *needy* on the survey but did not discuss it throughout conversations unless directly asked by me to define it. For example, Meredith shared, *"They're just like your little shadow following you around."*

Defiant was the third most frequently chosen behavior attribute, with 16 respondents (45.7%) selecting it. Of those respondents, 64.3% rated defiant as often problematic, with a score of four or higher. Interview participants used the word defiance or phrases that would imply it, such as *"stubborn streak," "they just won't do it",* or *"they'll just say no."* Defiance was discussed more frequently among the interview participants than any other behavior. I directly asked all three participants to share what defiance means to them. However, not including those direct answers, defiance, or behaviors that fall under the category of defiance (e.g., refusal to participate, saying "no") were mentioned 11 times. To Meredith, defiance is,

> *I mean, defiance is like, you know, kids that don't follow directions or will, you know, kinda like talk back or, you know, refuse to transition or whatever it is that you're doing. Sometimes, it can be a safety issue, which is difficult because, like, if they're, you know, being defiant and you're trying to transition to another place.*

Zoe had a similar definition to Meredith. Zoe describes defiance as,

> *So, I mean, defiance is just, I feel like if there's an expectation, whether it's something that you do every day or something that they're specifically asked to do, just not doing it…we definitely have children who are outright defiant and say "no." And then we have kids who, you know, it's clean up time, and they'll just kind of float around and look busy but not actually be doing anything, which I think is like a, it's a kind of defiance that's just not as in your face.*

Tom's definition of defiance was similar to that of previous participants. He added,

> *So, with a lot of defiancy cases…like if something happens to them, like, you know, if they hurt their foot or hurt their hand, or if something just doesn't go their way, then they'll*

> *just like completely shut down. They'll just drop to themselves to the floor, and they just won't wanna move on to the next activity.*

Surprisingly, Tom and Meredith talked a lot in the interview about defiance, using the word five times; however, they did not select *defiance* as one of their most common behaviors. Zoe was the only interviewee who chose *defiance*, rating it a five, "always a problem." She also selected *noncompliance*, rating it a five as well. Zoe expressed that defiant behavior was the most challenging behavior she has experienced, using the word six times in the interview.

It is not surprising that these preschool teachers experience behavior labeled as "defiant" to this level of frequency within their classrooms due to three- to five-year-old children increasing their capacity to communicate and to push for their independence (Alamos et al., 2022; Blankson et al., 2013; Carlson & Wang, 2007; Campbell et al., 2016b; Kalb & Leober, 2003; Mittal et al., 2013; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2011; Tayler, 2015; Wiebe et al., 2011). In other words, the perception that young children are defiant in preschool classrooms is a common experience illustrated within the literature (Aksoy, 2020; Mondi et al., 2022; Westling, 2010).

The pattern throughout our interview circled back to the child who says *"no"* or is resisting moving on from an activity. Of the three interview participants, Zoe struggled the most with defiance, sharing that it is *the* challenging behavior she experiences within her classroom, stating, *"When I think about the kids that we have with challenging behaviors, it's usually like like defiance, you know, we don't have kids who are you know, like biting or being violent in any way."* She references children with a *"stubborn streak"* or children who *"just say no"* and assert themselves as *"the boss."* Zoe uses numerous strategies when interacting with a child who does not want to participate or *"move on."* She shared one story about a child who, after not complying with her request, stood for ten minutes alone before *"deciding to do what everyone*

else was doing." When explaining different strategies she used in this case and others, Zoe shared,

> *Things like, just very um, they know what they want to do and is not going to be forced to do anything else…But I also find that, like, there are some things that will work for some kids that won't work for others, particularly when that, like, if I think about just dealing with defiance...if you make it a competition if they won't stop doing something, and you're like, "I bet I can pick up five toys before you do," that'll work for them. But it won't work for other kids who they get overwhelmed, or they just don't care.*

The fourth most common behavior attribute was *needs high levels of teacher support*, with 14 respondents (40%) selecting it. Of those respondents, 31.4% rated this behavior attribute as a four or higher, indicating it was often a problem.

All three interviewees also chose *needs high levels of teacher support*, with Meredith rating this behavior attribute as a three (average) and Tom and Zoe rating this behavior attribute as a five (always a problem). Comparing these ratings to what was discussed, I gathered from Meredith that behavior that *needs high levels of teacher support* implies a child is developing the skills they need to be successful in the classroom. Tom shared a lot about children *"escaping"* or *"pulling their pants down"* and *"dumping toys."* Tom told one story about a student,

> *And I can remember that when we were all outside in our play yard, there was at least one teacher that had to follow them, and it didn't matter who, but just somebody had to shadow this kid, like follow them everywhere, because you never knew what they were going to do and who they were going to do it to*.

Zoe also described children in her classroom *needing high levels of teacher support* as having more to do with lack of skill, just like in Meredith's experience, than challenging behavior. Zoe

describes *needing high levels of teacher* support by stating, "…*there are also the kids who lack all independent skills, which is one of the reasons that they're at school. But they need a lot of support…just knowing what to do all the time and needing constant reminders*." From the stories Tom and Zoe shared, I understood their perception of this behavior attribute and, therefore, the rating they assigned to it.

Two behavior attributes were the fifth most frequently chosen by survey respondents. *Talking out of turn* and *too much energy* was selected by 12 respondents (34.3%). Of those who decided *talking out of turn*, 31.4% rated this behavior as a four or higher. Of those who selected *too much energy*, 25.7% rated it as a four or higher (see Table 4).

The survey was a forced sample of common behavior attributes for survey respondents to select from; therefore, there may have been more behaviors that survey respondents experienced but could not indicate on this survey. Survey respondents (n=30) chose the remaining behavior attributes at least once but did not show a high frequency. These low frequencies are shown in Table 5.

Socially withdrawn was the least chosen, with only 8.6% of respondents selecting it. Of those 8.6%, two respondents rated socially withdrawn as a two, and one rated it as a four.

Six (17.1%) respondents selected *connection seeking*, and of those respondents, 5.8% rated this behavior as a four or higher. *Talking too loud* was chosen by 11 (31.4%) respondents, and of those, 22.9% rated this behavior as a four or higher. *Noncompliant* was selected by nine (25.7%) of respondents, and of those, 20% rated noncompliance as a four or higher. Twenty percent, or seven respondents, chose *overwhelmed* as a common behavior. Of those respondents, 11.4% rated it as a four or higher.

Table 5

Top Five Common Behavior Attributes with Low Frequencies

	Socially withdrawn	Frequency	Percent		Connection seeking	Frequency	Percent
Valid	2	2	5.7	Valid	2	2	5.7
	4	1	2.9		3	2	5.7
	Total	3	8.6		4	1	2.9
					5	1	2.9
					Total	6	17.1
	Talking too loud	Frequency	Percent		Noncompliant	Frequency	Percent
Valid	2	1	2.9	Valid	3	2	5.7
	3	2	5.7		4	1	2.9
	4	1	2.9		5	6	17.1
	5	7	20.0		Total	9	25.7
	Total	11	31.4				
	Overwhelmed	Frequency	Percent		Meltdown	Frequency	Percent
Valid	2	1	2.9	Valid	2	1	2.9
	3	2	5.7		3	2	5.7
	4	4	11.4		4	2	5.7
	Total	7	20.0		5	3	8.6
					Total	8	22.9
	Dysregulated	Frequency	Percent		Aggression	Frequency	Percent
Valid	3	1	2.9	Valid	3	1	2.9
	4	3	8.6		4	6	17.1
	5	3	8.6		5	1	2.9
	Total	7	20.0		Total	8	22.9

Note: Survey sample (n=30). Scores range from 1 – 5, ranging from "Never a problem" (1) to "Always a problem" (5).

Meltdown was selected by eight (22.9%) of respondents. Of those, 14.3% rated it as a four or higher. Meredith was the only interview participant to select this attribute on the survey, although Zoe and Tom discussed it throughout their conversations. Tom described meltdowns as one of the challenging behaviors he saw the most, describing the behavior as *"usually involves*

crying and screaming." While Zoe used the word *"tantrum"* instead of meltdown, she defined it similarly to Tom, saying, *"I think a tantrum is when they're, a child has like an an overwhelming emotion…you know anger or sadness or frustration".*

Dysregulated was chosen by seven (20%) of respondents, and of those, 17.2% rated it as a four or higher. Finally, *aggression* was selected by eight (22.9%) of respondents. Of those respondents, 20% rated it as a four or higher.

Aggressive Behavior in Extreme Cases. Surprisingly, survey respondents (n=30) and interview participants (n=3) did not select *aggression* as a top behavior attribute in classrooms, with it only being chosen by eight (22.9%) of survey respondents. Within literature (Aksoy, 2020; Alink et al., 2006; Campbell et al., 2016b; Gilliam, 2005; Giordano et al., 2021; Hartup, 1974; Kalb & Leober, 2003; Kochanska, 2002; Martin et al., 2018; Rogoff, 2003, Strain & Timm, 2001; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019) aggression is an often-reported challenging behavior within preschool classrooms. Within my survey and interview findings, aggression was rarely chosen or discussed as a common behavior; instead, it was only a behavior in extreme cases.

Neither Zoe, Tom, nor Meredith selected aggressive as a top behavior attribute in their survey responses. Tom referred to physical aggression when describing forms of defiance during his interview. For example, when describing what he would consider a disruption in the classroom, he said, *"If a child is constantly hitting other children, or maybe they're not following rules or not using their listening ears, or maybe they're just causing a disruption to the daily functions of the classroom."* Interview participants perceived that the setting and context influenced the incidences of aggressive behavior. Meredith and Zoe shared that at one point in their careers, they worked in large urban public schools, and both expressed these environments where more extreme behaviors took place, such as outbursts that were physically or verbally

aggressive towards teachers and peers. Zoe shared that during the moments in the public school when a child was having a challenging day, the head teacher would handle all interventions. Meredith taught kindergarten for many years in the public school and shared stories of students ripping up peers' work, swearing at the class, and hitting other children. She expressed,

> *I mean, that's one of the things I struggled with the most, like in the public school setting, was like, you know, the education of the kids was impacted because, like, I can't be teaching if I'm you know, protecting the kids from getting chairs thrown at them or whatever. You know, it's like, I can't. I'm not teaching them*.

However, when Meredith spoke about her experience in her nature-based program she did not share experiences of such intense situations. Zoe referred to only one student over six years in her center that required a higher level of attention due to *"lashing out like throwing or hitting."*

Although aggressive behavior was discussed, it was not a behavior perceived as the most challenging. Within this sample of participating preschool teachers from Plymouth County, they perceived challenging behaviors as those that impacted not only their ability to move along in their instruction but also required more teacher attention, as discussed in the following theme.

"Other kids need attention too."

The other reoccurring word that these preschool teachers used was *attention.* Each participant used this word to describe challenging behavior that either required more of their attention, in their opinion, caused other children to receive less attention, or caused other children to repeat the problematic behavior. Common behaviors that caused participants to give more attention were *impulsivity* and *neediness* due to their students reacting quickly to something they wanted; Zoe, Tom, and Meredith must attend to these children constantly. Needing attention could mean monitoring an activity more closely, ensuring a child does not bolt out of the

classroom, or providing more emotional support than the teacher has time to give due to the needs of other children. Following her view that providing attention is not negative in of itself, though she was not able to give what she feels children need all the time, Meredith shared,

> *But they like are seeking adult assistance for, or kids that are, you know, maybe just need like that extra emotional help…Or they wanna be held…but it's like you know, there again, there are other kids that need attention too, so that can be difficult*.

As described in an earlier section, Tom shared his experience with one student who always required the attention of at least one teacher on their playground due to this child being unpredictable in teachers' eyes. According to these teachers, the other side of this attention directed towards one or two children is peers' reaction to it. They describe other children in their classrooms paying attention to, copying, or *"mimicking"* problematic behaviors. As Tom put it, *"So in their head, they might think, 'Oh if I act up, then I'll finally get the attention I'm so desperately needing."* Meredith agreed with Tom, reflecting,

> *You know, the other kids, like, I agree that, like, you know the behaviors can be, you know, mimicked by other kids, especially if they see that another child is getting attention for it. And they're also getting less attention from the teacher because the teacher is so focused on managing the whatever the behavior it is.*

Adding to the conversation, Zoe said,

> *Well, sometimes, they're, the peers in the classroom, depending on what's happening, just because a particular student is getting a lot of attention that could otherwise be used for more developmentally appropriate things for the peers that don't have those challenging behaviors*.

The essence of what these three teachers discussed when it came to providing attention was the desire to offer it but also being pulled in other directions by other children. One barrier to delivering this attention was so often, these teachers were alone with several students at a time. It is not the reoccurring behavior of impulsivity and neediness that challenge these teachers, but these behaviors are challenging because of the attention they require. To summarize, Meredith states, *"They're the ones that are that like, require more individualized attention, which takes away from like your attention on the rest of the group."*

Child-centered Perceptions

Perceptions and belief systems teachers hold about children and their behavior have a strong influence on how they approach teaching (Alamos et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Crane et al., 2013; Howes et al., 2013; Hur et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2014; Lippard et al., 2018; Moen et al., 2019; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020a; Post et al., 2020b; Sabol et al., 2018; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Vu, 2015; Westerberg et al., 2020; Wolcott et al., 2019; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Meredith demonstrates her perceptions and beliefs about children and their behavior in her shared stories and survey results. Meredith scored within the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) Short Form high closeness subscale. The survey developer describes the closeness subscale,

> High closeness scores indicate that the relationship is characterized by warmth, and the teacher believes they are effective because the student uses the teacher as a source of support. High closeness scores also reflect a greater sense of knowing on behalf of the teacher that the student is well and the student can effectively use the teacher as a resource (Pianta, 2001b, p. 2).

Meredith characterizes her relationship with students as warm and sees herself as a source of support. Meredith discussed the learning environment, family stressors, and development as causes of challenging behavior. She believes that children need the space to play and to work out their emotions safely. Meredith describes her nature-based program philosophy as including *"choice," "freedom,"* and *"space to move."* She illustrates this point by saying,

> *It's like, you know, kids, you know, throwing things or knocking things down or dumping toys out, it's like, we have the space to. You know, it's like, "Ok, so you can't do that here, but you can do it here". You know, this is a safe space. This is a safe way to do that. And so, they're getting whatever you know, sensory needs they have met, but it's, it's in a constructive way and a safe way*.

Tom and Zoe, in contrast, both indicated by their behavior attributes ratings and high conflict scores, more negative and conflictual relationships with their students. It was in analyzing their interview data that their belief systems and child-centered perceptions became evident. This phenomenon is what Hamre et al. (2008) call "residualized conflict" (p. 122).

In their national scale study, Hamre et al. (2008) found,

> …among factors associated with teachers' reports of conflict with students, their judgments of those students' problem behaviors were the most significant predictor. Over half…of the variance in teachers' reports of conflict with students was explained by their judgments of problem behavior (p. 130).

Tom and Zoe's description of challenging behaviors supports this notion of residualized conflict in their high conflict scores. This more nuanced understanding can be seen in Zoe's description of her beliefs even when frustrated,

> *I mean, I know that, like, as much as I try not to, there are certain kids where I'm just like, ugh! And I know, like it's, it's not their fault, and but, and so I feel like I spend more time with those kids because I feel bad that I have like a negative thought in my head about it…Yeah like, I know, you know, they're three. They don't know…they're still learning all these things. And I'm the adult. So, I need to, like, be the one to show up and, you know, be mature about it*.

Zoe's authentic self-talk demonstrates her awareness of that frustration and the desire to repair that relationship, exemplifying residualized conflict: "…more or less conflict, as reported by their teacher, than would have been expected based on their teachers' judgments of problem behavior" (Hamre et al., 2008, p. 130).

One assumption that I had at the beginning of this study was that participants who scored within the high conflict subscale would naturally show a perceived negative relationship with children in their classroom. However, Tom, who scored high in conflict, conversely shared the importance of forming relationships with children, stating,

> *But as teachers, we need to form a relationship with every single child…we need to make the time for every child, especially those with challenging behaviors because they'll benefit from that relationship with the teacher, and the teacher will also benefit from having that relationship and forming it with that child*.

In other words, the variance in their scores compared to their expressed perceptions during our conversations shows residualized conflict. Both Zoe and Tom describe self-awareness even when they are tired and frustrated. Their stories share an overall sense of the importance of having a warm relationship with their students.

"They're so young."

Participants of the study agree with research that challenging behavior is grounded in child development (Alink et al., 2006; Campbell, 2002; Campbell et al., 2016b; Hartup, 1974; Kalb & Leober, 2003; Kochanska, 2002; Martin et al., 2018; Mittal et al., 2013; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2011) and potentially traumatic events (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2016a; Connell et al., 2018; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995). Zoe, Tom, and Meredith expressed a belief that challenging behavior begins within four overarching areas: (a) expected child development or developmental delays, (b) young children's first experiences with school and being outside of their homes, (c) potentially traumatic events, and lastly, (d) the influence of play and school structure. In taking this stance, these three preschool teachers understand that challenging behavior results from the environment, whether at home or school and from biological influences. Meredith attributed challenging behavior to several influences sharing,

> *There's a whole lot. I mean personalities, you know, diagnosis like ADHD or autism. Or you know, I mean the whole oppositional defiance disorder, you know, different attachment disorders that kids have. You know, family backgrounds, trauma, you know, prior negative experiences with school. Even just like teacher-student dynamic, you know, like personalities between the teacher and the child; some mesh well, some don't, you know, teaching style, classroom environment.*

Developmental Appropriateness

Developmental scientists (Alamos et al., 2022; Blankson et al., 2013; Carlson & Wang, 2007; Campbell et al., 2016b; Mittal et al., 2013; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2011; Tayler, 2015; Wiebe et al., 2011) agree that preschool age children have immature executive function skills,

language skills, and emotion regulation, which can be exacerbated if children experience adversity (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2016a; Connell et al., 2018; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995). Many preschool children are mastering self-care skills, including using the bathroom independently; in Zoe's words, "*They're three. They don't know…they're still learning all these things."* They are learning physical proximity, and with frequent growth spurts, they naturally fall and bump into others. The participant stories mirror the understanding of child development. Zoe, Tom, and Meredith expressed the belief challenging behavior is not a willful or purposeful act on behalf of the child; it is a result of how they are developing and experiencing the world. Meredith questions a premature push of academics over natural child development, reporting,

> *As a teacher like, over fifteen years of seeing like how education and developmentally appropriate practices have changed, like how much more rigid the classroom setting has become and how much more academic focus had been placed on kids as young as three, four, and five in the public school setting and noticing behaviors increasing.*

Zoe shared her beliefs surrounding the impact of development and how not having an expanded vocabulary could impact children's behavior. At one point in the conversation, she said,

> *I find that a lot of challenging behavior can also be speech related, like whether they haven't developed the language yet or ah, and they just get frustrated…so just a combination of being young, being out of the house, not having appropriate or not having developed language skills that would help [their behavior].*

First School Experiences. All three teachers expressed the demands attending preschool can put on young children at different points in the conversations. Zoe reflected,

> *When we have challenging behaviors, a lot of it is just that it's their first school experience, and it's a lot of, you know, adjusting to routines and knowing that, you know, there are expectations for them, and just learning what it's like to be away from mom and dad and what they're used to*.

Tom echoed Zoe's experience and added,

> *I think also one of the things that plays into effect is the child's home life. They might not necessarily have a lot of rules at home, and when they're at school, they have all these rules they have to follow.*

Meredith also felt that challenging behavior can be attributed to a child's first experience in preschool, saying, *"I think in part because for many children, daycare/preschool is their first experience away from their families."*

Potentially Traumatic Events. When it comes to potentially traumatic events, participants described these as being expected life-changing events, such as a new sibling, to unexpected life events, such as a parent being diagnosed with terminal cancer. The behaviors connected to these events, such as *"tantrums"* or *"knocking items off a shelf"* to *"running around hitting other children,"* were challenging to support but were met with empathy by these teachers. Their ability to approach challenging behavior with a trauma-sensitive perspective provided these children with a safe environment to express their big emotions (Cole et al., 2005; Cole et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2017; Pianta et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2018; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). For example, Zoe described the potential impact life events have on young children's behavior. She shared the following story,

> *Or even, you know, a new sibling or a move, or just like anything can rock these little kids' worlds because they're, they're so young, and they don't know, they don't*

> *understand change…Another example that I have is that we have a little kid who, over break, was hospitalized with pneumonia and was taken like in an ambulance, spent a couple of nights in the ER, and their mom brought them in yesterday saying that, you know, they've been having horrible tantrums, and she just feels like they've been traumatized, and anything will set them off. And so, I imagine, like, any sort of like scary experience or thing that will, that upsets their equilibrium, can have that sort of effect on a three-year-old who feels like they don't control anything…anything scary and different could lead to behavior that would be challenging.*

Both Tom and Meredith echo what Zoe described as *"traumatic"* or *"loss of control."* They both used examples of *"unstable backgrounds"* and varying home influences. For example, Tom said, *"We've had kids that have seen trauma, and we've seen kids that are going through a rough time. So, they do tend to showcase a bit more of those challenging behaviors."*

Influence of the Learning Environment. Just as the home environment can impact young children's behavior, the learning environment can also have an impact. Meredith discussed a change in children's behavior when they have time and space to play. She highlighted the difference the structure of a learning environment can make when describing her experiences at a traditional public school versus her private nature-based preschool. She contrasted a "*much more rigid the classroom setting"* to her nature-based preschool program, reporting,

> *Then you know, realizing, like, how much play-based curriculum is beneficial to kids and being outdoors…like the kids have the space to move. They have choice. They have freedom, all those things…So I, anyway, just seeing the like the differences in behavior challenges when kids are given that space.*

In summary, these preschool teachers define challenging behavior as difficult to manage and require more attention. This behavior is not viewed negatively; instead, they believe young children behave this way due to influences out of their control, such as development, first experiences in preschool, and potentially traumatic events that they experience, which is supported by research (Campbell et al., 2016b; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2009 Perry, 1997; Perry & Pollard, 1998).

Behavior Impacts Relationships

The analysis below seeks to answer the second guiding research question: *How does challenging behavior impact relationships between children and preschool teachers in an early learning setting?* When participants reflected on this question, some comments connected challenging behavior to the classroom community or children in the classroom, but mostly, stories centered around teachers' feelings of personal defeat. For example, Tom shared,

> *It [challenging behavior] affects the teacher too, because, say, a behavior is ongoing, and it happens every single day, but if a teacher's like burnt out, and they don't have any help like if they're in a classroom all by themselves with ten children, that can definitely cause a bit of anxiety for the teacher if they don't have like a teacher in the classroom next door, or if the director is busy doing something else, and they don't have that support to help manage the child.*

In the following section, I triangulate the stories told with the data gathered through the STRS Short Form on the survey. In addition, I describe how these preschool teachers' relationships with themselves are impacted by challenging behavior and how their energy impacts the wider classroom community.

Closeness and Conflict in Relationships

Preschool teachers typically spend many hours with their young students, so they naturally form relationships with them. When preschool teachers are responsive to children's needs, offer support, and are accepting of a child, close relationships are formed. However, relationships can be complex to navigate and sometimes complicated to establish. If a preschool teacher struggles to form a close relationship with a child, the lack of relationship can often lead to more conflict within the classroom.

To understand the nature of relationships with this sample (n=30) of preschool teachers, I analyzed the STRS Short Form mean scores for survey respondents (n=30) and interview participants (n=3); I interviewed participants (n=3) about their teaching experiences and calculated a Pearson correlation coefficient. Table 6 shows the moderate negative correlation between survey respondents' (n=30) closeness and conflict mean scores.

Table 6

Bivariate Pearson Correlation

		Closeness	Conflict
Closeness	Pearson Correlation	1	-.492**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.006
	N	30	30
Conflict	Pearson Correlation	-.492**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	
	N	30	30

Note. ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

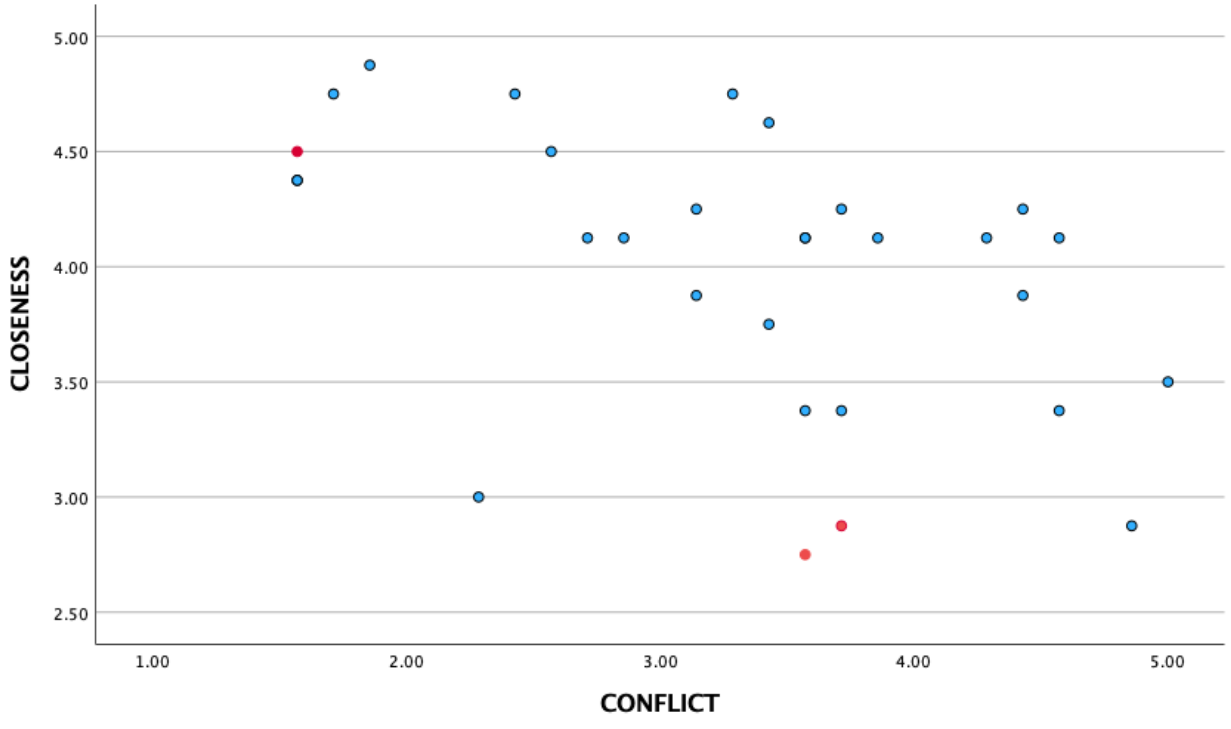
Table 6 shows there is a moderate negative correlation between the two variables, $r = -.492$, $p<.01$. Quantitative analysis shows most survey respondents are categorized as having a close relationship with their student. Within the survey sample (n=30), 19 (63.3%) of

respondents scored within the high closeness range, 11 (36.6%) scored within the average range, and zero (0%) scored within the low range. Within the sample (n=30), 7 (23.3%) of survey respondents scored within the high conflict range, 18 (60%) scored within the average range, and 5 (16.6%) scored within the low range (see Table 7).

These 30 dots shown on the scatter plot in Figure 2 represent 30 individual preschool teachers from Plymouth County. As illustrated, most teachers are falling within the mid- to high range of the closeness score. The scatter plot visually represents Table 7.

Figure 2

Simple scatter plot illustrates the moderate negative correlation between closeness and conflict mean scores.



Note. The red dots represent the interview participants, and the blue dots represent the remaining survey sample.

Table 7

Survey Respondents Student-Teacher Relationship Short Form Scores

Participant	Raw score Closeness	Raw Score Conflict	Closeness Mean	Conflict Mean
1	33	25	4.13	3.57
2	28	35	3.5	5.0
3	34	31	4.25	4.43
4	33	20	4.13	2.86
5	35	11	4.38	1.57
6	31	22	3.88	3.14
7	22	25	2.75	3.57
8	34	22	4.25	3.14
9	39	13	4.88	1.86
10	35	11	4.38	1.57
11	27	32	3.38	4.57
12	38	17	4.75	2.43
13	34	26	4.25	3.71
14	23	26	2.87	3.71
15	23	34	2.87	4.86
16	27	25	3.37	3.57
17	38	23	4.75	3.29
18	37	24	4.63	3.43
19	31	31	3.88	4.43
20	36	11	4.5	1.57
21	38	12	4.75	1.71
22	36	18	4.5	2.57
23	30	24	3.75	3.43
24	24	16	3	2.29
25	27	26	3.38	3.71
26	34	25	4.13	3.57
27	36	19	4.13	2.71
28	20	30	4.13	4.29
29	39	27	4.13	3.88
30	33	32	4.13	4.57

Note. Survey participants' subscale scores (n=30). Mean scores range from 1 – 5, with a higher score indicating greater closeness or greater conflict.

Although this sample is small, understanding the subscale scores gives a clear profile of the teachers who responded to the survey. Within this sample (n=30), respondents were more likely to fall within the high closeness subscale, as seen in Table 7. This overall closeness can be seen in the participant interviews,

> *But as teachers, we need to form a relationship with every single child…we need to make the time for every child, especially those with challenging behaviors because they'll benefit from that relationship with the teacher, and the teacher will also benefit from having that relationship and forming it with that child*.

The descriptive statistics in Table 8 illustrate the spectrum of closeness and conflict subscale scores (minimum and maximum) found within the survey sample (n=30) and the difference in the mean between subscales. As shown in Table 8, the minimum closeness score is 2.75, close to average (3), and the highest closeness score was 4.88, close to five (high). This suggests that the preschool teachers who responded to this survey scored close to average or higher in closeness to their relationship with students. The lowest score within the range of conflict scores is 1.57, which suggests less conflict among the survey sample. The maximum score in conflict reported was 5 (high), with only seven survey respondents scoring within the high conflict range, suggesting lower conflict among the survey sample.

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics for Closeness and Conflict Mean Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Closeness	30	2.75	4.88	3.99	.602557
Conflict	30	1.57	5.00	3.30	1.01178836
Valid N	30				

Note. Descriptive statistics for closeness and conflict mean scores for survey respondents. Mean scores range from 1 – 5, with a higher score indicating greater closeness or greater conflict.

Tables 6, 7, 8, and Figure 2 clearly show the profiles of the preschool teachers who participated in this study. These tables and figure explain the positive finding, indicating that those who took the survey have a classroom marked by responsive teaching versus a conflictual environment. Given that we know relationships matter, it is encouraging to determine most of this sample has relationships marked with closeness in tandem with reported challenging behaviors.

"It's exhausting."

To my surprise, qualitative data do not point to challenging behavior negatively or positively impacting relationships between children and teachers. In fact, I found challenging behavior impacts a teacher's relationship *with* themselves. At the beginning of this study, I assumed that participants who scored within the high conflict range of the STRS Short Form subscale would naturally confirm a perceived negative relationship with children in their classroom through the interviews. Those participants who scored within the high closeness range of the STRS Short Form subscale, I had also presumed, would naturally show a perceived positive relationship with students. Astonishingly, this was not the case with those who scored high in conflict. The interview data do not confirm that challenging behaviors impact relationships with children, families, and coworkers.

When asked directly who was impacted by challenging behavior in the classroom, the overpowering emotion of interview participants' stories was personal defeat. These teachers shared they were bothered by not being able to provide what they wanted for their students. They conveyed how they felt alone, exhausted, and self-aware that they could do more but could not do so. At one point, Meredith said,

> *And you're just like, alright. I gotta get through. I gotta do the best I can when the kids are in my care and, you know, get through this year and pass them on. And you know, hopefully, I'm sending them on a little bit more with some extra skills than they came to me with*.

Burnout. Burnout is a widespread problem within the early education field (Pianta et al., 2016; Schaack et al., 2020). Tom reported that teachers tend to *"stay away"* from children with challenging behaviors due to the lack of support they receive and how exhausted teachers have become. Feelings of burnout can impact a teacher's ability to be effective in the classroom and to form positive relationships with children (Alamos et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Jeon et al., 2014; Sabol et al., 2018). Tom shared his awareness of his feelings of burnout and how he notices when he raises his voice or cannot wait to go home. Zoe, who works part-time, also goes home feeling exhausted, saying,

> *Yeah, when I come home, and I'm like ugh!* (Throws head back) *And I only work mornings!* (Laughs) *I work like four hours a day, and I'm like, "Oh my God!"* (Laughs) *But yeah, but it's worth it. It's great.*

Both Zoe and Tom indicated signs of burnout when completing the survey. Their STRS Short Form scores would suggest they are experiencing burnout and perceive their relationship with the student selected for this exercise to be a struggle. Zoe and Tom scored within the high conflict range and average closeness range (see Table 9).

The STRS Short Form mean scores of Zoe, Tom, and Meredith indicate this smaller sample of three leans towards the high end of conflict, with Zoe and Tom scoring high in conflict and Meredith scoring high in closeness. Through my conversations with these participants, I teased out the residualized conflict (Hamre et al., 2008), in other words, the "why" behind the

variation between their conflict and closeness mean scores, chosen behavior attributes, and their perceptions of challenging behavior. Hamre et al. (2008) explain residualized conflict as the "variance in teachers' reports of conflict [that] would be explained by their perceptions of children's problem behaviors" (p. 119). Although two participating preschool teachers, Zoe and Tom, scored high in conflict, their expressed perception of children's challenging behavior is that it is developmentally appropriate, and they viewed it from a place of understanding.

Table 9

Interview Participants' Closeness & Conflict Mean Scores

	Raw Closeness	Raw Conflict	Closeness Mean	Conflict Mean
Zoe	23	26	2.87	3.71
Tom	22	25	2.75	3.57
Meredith	36	11	4.50	1.57

Note. Mean scores range from 1 – 5, with a higher score indicating greater closeness or greater conflict.

Tom's conflict mean score resulted in .1 decimals less than Zoe's when comparing closeness and conflict scores. Using the conflict subscale description from the STRS Short Form developer, "high conflict scores indicate that the teacher struggles with the student, perceives the student as angry or unpredictable, and consequently the teacher feels emotionally drained and believes they are ineffective" (Pianta, 2001b, p. 2).

Tom brought up burnout directly when discussing how challenging behavior impacts relationships in the classroom, stating, "…*but if a teacher's like burn out, and they don't have any help like….that can definitely cause a bit of anxiety for the teacher*…". When I asked Tom to describe in more detail what he means by "burnout," he answered, "*On many occasions, I've raised my voice and afterwards felt very tired and was counting down the hours until I got to go*

home. That's what I mean by burnout". Meredith describes a similar sentiment, adding, *"I mean it makes you doubt yourself as a teacher. It makes you feel less effective, makes you feel burnt out. And it's, you know, a struggle to keep your motivation."* She continued,

> *Typically, burnt-out teachers don't have the patience emotional capacity to deal with behavioral issues, and if no support is provided, other children in the class may begin to mimic these behaviors until everything looks and feels out of control…Personally, when I was burnt out, I felt as though I was failing all of my students. I found myself to be less creative in my lesson planning. I also doubted my effectiveness as a teacher.*

These feelings of personal defeat indicate these teachers' impressions of themselves and what they can accomplish as teachers, similar to how Ducharme et al. (2008) define burnout. Although the participants in this study work hard to keep supportive relationships with their students, research has indicated that teachers who feel burnt out will inadvertently reinforce negativity and conflictual relationships within their classroom. Just as stressors within a family can impact parental caregivers' ability to form a secure attachment with their children, stressors within a school can affect the teacher's ability to create a close relationship with their students (Alamos et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Bowlby, 1982; Glover Gagnon et al. 2019; Jeon et al., 2014; Sabol et al., 2018).

Alone without Support. Interviewed teachers repeated stories of being alone with upwards of ten children or two teachers to twenty children. Young preschool children require a lot of adult attention, and if a teacher is alone with a class of ten preschoolers, naturally, this teacher will have little time to provide the care and attention young children need. Meredith explained this well,

> *And as many hats as we wear, it's like you're not a social worker. You're not a doctor. You're not a, you know, a therapist. And we take all those roles on, you know, and it's like just, it's exhausting. But you're one person and you can only do what you can do.*

These teachers shared their frustration when discussing not having the support to teach children in the ways children need. Zoe shared a story about not having enough teachers to support a child's challenging behavior, which resulted in the child being asked to leave her program. She shared,

> *So, it would take, you know, you need a person dealing with them while someone else is watching the rest of the children or doing, you know, the rest of the routine. So, it just, it just didn't work with the staffing of that particular class.*

Meredith illustrated an example of the inability to implement needed strategies to support a child due to being alone. Meredith said,

> *But like in the moment, you know, and if a child is completely escalated, if you don't have another staff member to show a child how to use that, you know, calming corner or whatever, it's great to have it, but the kids that need it the most are not able to use it independently. So, I feel like there's only so much that one person can do in a classroom by themselves.*

Tom added, *"It might not be easy to give each child one-on-one because, again, we could be alone in the classroom with ten children."*

The part of our conversation that focused on relationships concentrated on these teachers' internal conflict of wanting to provide and implement strategies and teaching techniques. However, they are likely unable to do so because they are alone in a classroom without nearby support. This produces feelings of exhaustion, inadequacy, and a sense that they are not good

enough or effective enough. Therefore, the relationships within themselves are impacted the most, which will likely begin to affect the relationships throughout their classrooms.

Teacher Energy Impacts the Classroom Community. Teacher energy impacts the classroom community as a whole, both negatively and positively. It has been shown that teachers who are burnt out have a hard time forming close relationships with children in their classrooms, which can perpetuate children's challenging behaviors, which, in turn, will influence children's relationships with their peers (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Cooper et al., 2017; Jeon et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2019; Sabol et al., 2018; Vu, 2015). The participants acknowledged the impact challenging behavior has on peers in the classroom. Within their stories, they addressed that when they have time to support children effectively, they can do so in a strength-based way. Zoe shared that, in her opinion, peers can get annoyed and frustrated with the specific behavior of others. She shared the way she creates opportunities for children to gain awareness of how their actions impact their peers, reporting,

> *We'll you know, "Look at your friends, how do you think they feel? Do you think they feel good about this? Are you making them happy? Are they gonna want to play with you?" You know, just kind of exploring that a little bit. I think that's helped a little bit.*

Meredith shared similar strategies as Zoe. She also acknowledged that the other children in the classroom are impacted by behavior but circled back to her ability or inability to provide support for all children. She expressed,

> *And then also not having the time in the day to actually help kids learn to cope with, you know, their emotions and what you mean even from the beginning, like, starting to identify their emotions. You know, there just wasn't space left in the day.*

She goes on to explain the impact less teacher attention has on other children, sharing,

> *And so it's like, there's a lot of time during the day where they're, you know, managing themselves, almost like where they're, you know, expected to sit and wait until, you know, the issue can be resolved and you know, it's not fair to them.*

The classroom community extends to a child's family, including any adult in the child's life who might bring the child to and from preschool. We know from research that the relationships between teachers and families and their perceptions of each other are critical to children's success in the classroom (Chen & Phillips, 2018; Eismann et al., 2020; Gilliam et al., 2016; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019) and how information is communicated between home and school can influence either sides' stress level (Crane et al., 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Westerberg et al., 2020). Zoe expressed an ongoing challenging behavior that was similar in a pair of siblings within her program. She talked about speaking with their family about these challenges but commented that the family's nanny was the primary person teachers interacted with, and therefore, it was not as easy to make a connection. Tom described families as a potential resource for teachers to understand children's classroom behavior better. Although in agreement, Meredith and Zoe added that it often feels like families are *"not upfront"* with information. Zoe shared,

> *And it was also an instance where the parent was not fully upfront with us about the situation, where she had not told us about some of the issues, behavior issues that the child was having, and that, you know, they weren't one of the "model" students in the integrated class because the child was there because they needed more help and that had not been relayed to us.*

Meredith shared a similar sentiment. She said,

> *I feel like sometimes the families that, like, their kid has the most challenging behaviors, they're either like in denial about it, or they're maybe embarrassed by it, so they don't*

> *want to talk about it, or they don't want to address it. It's hard to know sometimes like what, what's really going on here? Like, you know, they may like make excuses or whatever, and it's like, what's the real story, like are you just kinda like trying to like push it away because you don't, you know that it's an issue?*

There was agreement that it can take time to form a relationship with a family, but with accumulating stress, at times, the sense of personal defeat takes over. Meredith expressed this when she said,

> *But sometimes like I end up getting, I almost take a step back from those families that the challenging behaviors, if they don't seem receptive to it [intervention]. Because I'm like, what's the point? It's like futile, you know? Like I don't, I like, nothing I'm saying is like getting through to you, or at least that's what it feels like.*

The ability of a teacher to feel successful and utilize the skills they have to support young children directly impacts the classroom environment. As illustrated throughout the interviews I had with these teachers, the impact challenging behavior has on relationships comes back to them:

1. Do they feel effective?
2. Have they provided children with the attention they need?
3. Were they able to spend enough time with each child to practice social skills and identify emotions?

These participants described their ability to teach children in successful ways, but when they are feeling defeated from teaching alone without the needed support, they begin to feel powerless and ineffective (Chen et al., 2021; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014b; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Post et al., 2020b; Recchia, 2012;

Ruprecht, 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Meredith expresses ways to keep motivation despite not having what she needs. She added,

> *I feel like, especially when I was younger, it was like, I need to be able to handle this. I need to be able to do this by myself. And it's like, that it's ok to like ask for help. And you're not always going to get like the help that you need, and you're not always gonna get that help that is really helpful. But, like, keep trying. Don't give up. And you know, you can't reach, you're not going to reach every kid and solve every kid's like, I feel like you know, I took it like, really onto myself. I mean, I still do. But it's like, if I really connect with this kid enough like, I'll be able to save them. And it's like, you can't. You can't do that, you know? It's like, but you're only with them for so long, and there's things that are way beyond your control.*

Two main ingredients are needed for a preschool teacher to have the ability to be present for their students and redirect challenging behaviors, and that includes having access to support and feeling effective.

Significant Findings

As I sought to answer my guiding research questions, four reoccurring themes of (1) *They just won't do it,* (2) *Other kids need attention too,* (3) *They're so young,* and (4) *It's exhausting,* became unmistakable, leading me to three significant findings:

1. Preschool teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach children with challenging behavior.
2. Preschool teachers' feelings of isolation influence their ability to teach children with challenging behavior.

3. When preschool teachers feel a sense of connectedness, their success, and satisfaction in the classroom increases.

A sense of fulfillment and two barriers were teased out through conversation in the interviews. As participants discussed their perceptions of children's challenging behaviors and how those behaviors impact relationships, what continued to emerge beyond the themes reported above were the barriers of inadequate preparation and isolation these teachers experience. However, what was also clear was what gives these teachers a sense of fulfillment; when that happens, they feel successful in their teaching.

It is evident from the literature that burnout is a widespread problem in early education (Pianta et al., 2016; Schaack et al., 2020). While it is not shocking that these specific findings emerged from the data, it was striking to me that the conversations did *not* evolve around children or their behavior being the largest source of challenge. Within my study, I found that behavior's impact on relationships within the classroom is influenced by the widespread problems within the early education system, *not* the child.

Finding One: Preschool teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach children with challenging behavior.

Preschool teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach children with challenging behavior. Across the field of early education there are variations of required preparation for teachers (Ai et al., 2022; Attwood et al., 2021; Blewitt et al., 2020; Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020b; Schaack et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

The research (Cooper et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2021; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Lippard et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020; Recchia, 2012; Vu, 2015; Westerberg et al., 2020; Zulauf &

Zinsser, 2019) proposes education and professional development can increase a teacher's capacity to understand young children and have an increase in sensitivity to external influences on a child's behavior. However, data gathered in this study suggest that the level of education and professional development are not necessarily predictors of a teacher's ability to establish a close relationship with students in their classroom, even if accompanied by challenging behavior.

Is the Level of Education an Indicator?

In Massachusetts, early education teachers need one three-credit child development college course for teacher certification in community-based early learning centers. Of the 30 survey respondents, 84.4% reported having an associate degree or higher. All three teachers I interviewed held degrees: one bachelor's degree and two master's degrees.

The assumption that I held going into this study was that participants who earned degrees would express more preparedness in supporting children with challenging behavior. It is important to note that within my survey sample, educational background variability did not predict closeness and conflict scores. Survey respondents who scored high or average in closeness had various levels of education, ranging from a high school diploma to a master's degree (see Table 10). Surprisingly, survey respondents who scored high in conflict all hold either bachelor's or master's degrees (see Table 10).

In addition, holding a degree was not a predictor of feeling prepared to deal with challenging behaviors for the interview participants of this study. This finding underscores the variability found within pre-service training (Ai et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020b; Schaack et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019) and the potential gaps in content knowledge taught within higher education preparatory programs (Buettner et al., 2016; Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019).

Table 10

Survey respondents (n=30) Demographics and STRS Short Form mean scores

Participant	Work hours	Years in field	Education level	Closeness Mean Score	Conflict Mean Score
2	40	7-10	Bachelor's degree	3.5	5
9	40	10+	Some college	4.88	1.86
10	39	0-2	High school	4.38	1.57
11	40	10+	Master's degree	3.38	4.57
14	20	3-6	Master's degree	2.88	3.71
15	30	10+	Master's degree	2.88	4.88
20	30	10+	Master's degree	4.5	1.57
21	28	10+	Master's degree	4.75	1.71
25	40	3-6	Bachelor's degree	3.38	3.71
28	40	7-10	Master's degree	4.13	4.29

Note. Scores range from 1 – 5, with a higher score indicating greater closeness or greater conflict.

Among the three preschool teachers interviewed, all described few to no classes regarding challenging behaviors of young children, which the available literature supports (Attwood et al., 2021; Buettner et al., 2016; Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011) Tom recalled his college experience,

> *I think I would have probably benefited if I took a class specifically for challenging behaviors because the classes I took when I was in college, the topic was kind of littered through. It was really like we didn't dive down deep. So, I think I would have benefited the most if there was just a class specifically for challenging behaviors and like different strategies on how to manage them, and certain challenging behaviors you might see, and where those behaviors come from.*

Higher education programs vary in how they prepare students for the field (Attwood et al., 2021; Buettner et al., 2016; Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011). When I asked Tom if he felt other teachers in the field were in the same position as him, he stated,

> *I think that a lot of teachers probably aren't prepared to deal with challenging behaviors. They might not necessarily have the skills to do so. They may have taken classes on challenging behaviors, and they might be thinking to themselves, "Oh, a challenging behavior isn't gonna happen. I won't have to do this at all." But then they go into a classroom, and they find out that they have, let's say, ten kids with challenging behaviors, and they're like, "Whoa! I was not prepared for this".*

Meredith and Zoe shared similar experiences in college. Zoe shared her master's in education degree was a career change and that most of her preparation came from being a mother and experience once she was in the field. About graduate school, she said,

> *I would say it [the topic of challenging behavior] was sort of littered throughout the classes…So, um, I can't remember if we had one specifically on challenging behaviors. We had one on um, like disabilities and learning differences, but I don't think it, it wasn't specifically challenging behaviors, but it was sort of, you were able to draw from many of the classes different ideas.*

Meredith echoed what both Zoe and Tom shared. Describing her college experience, she said,

> *I feel like the classes that we took in school it was like all about like setting up structure and routine. And those are all like super important, and those benefit most kids, you know? But a lot of the kids with more challenging behaviors, there's like extenuating circumstances that are like outside of school. And it's like, I just feel like you're not, you're like, "Oh, like all these things like I can control." And there's so many things that like you can't. And you know, like having strategies for like how to deal with that, so you're not just like blindsided when it happens.*

As expressed in her sentiment above, Meredith's opinion regarding the slight significance structural qualities have on children's success is supported by research (Blewitt et al., 2020; Howes et al., 2013; Hur et al., 2016; Lippard et al., 2018; Moen et al., 2019; Pianta et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2018; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Wolcott et al., 2019). Instead, research supports the benefits of establishing a close relationship between teacher and student regarding children's positive outcomes.

The Role of In-service Professional Development. The trend of not being prepared adequately followed these three preschool teachers once they entered the field. The Massachusetts Department of Early Education & Care (EEC) requires all teachers, assistant teachers, and leaders to complete an annual requirement of 20 hours of professional development, with five of those hours focused on special education (Massachusetts Department of Early Education & Care, n.d.). However, no cohesive system is in place to access meaningful and accessible professional development. Unfortunately, this is not specific to Massachusetts but across the U.S. (Buettner et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2021; Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Jamil et al., 2022; Loomis, 2018; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Rucker et al., 2023).

The interviewed teachers received varying levels of support and guidance for how to complete the annual professional development required by EEC as well as modeling how to support challenging behavior, as explained by Tom, *"Every teacher, when they come across challenging behavior, they have a different way of doing it."* Meredith agreed with the varying levels of experience and knowledge, suggesting,

> *Everybody's at a different place in their career and everybody has their own strategies and ways they've been taught. And I think it's really difficult to kind of get everybody on*

> *the same page, especially if people are in their own like, they have their own philosophies and what's worked for them.*

This feeling of not knowing if support is available can increase the stress a teacher is experiencing daily. If these teachers were adequately prepared instead of, as Tom put it, *"I had never seen a behavior like that before,"* imagine the positive outcomes for young children. Instead, these teachers are left to seek professional development, sometimes at their own cost. Zoe's director supports her staff with identifying professional development but does not have an agenda to follow or cover the expense. Zoe shared, *"We are required to participate in professional development each year. The topics are left for us to choose. Our director typically sends us affordable offerings when they are sent to her."* In Tom's center, the expectation is that teachers find and complete professional development on their own time and expense. Professional development topics offered by his center do not pertain to challenging behavior. He shared,

> *My center doesn't focus on challenging behaviors during our staff meeting. The topics we covered are topics related to leadership and others that I can't remember. I honestly feel like we all need a refresher on certain topics, like challenging behaviors. My director's response would be for us to take courses in order to learn these topics*.

Meredith has had experiences similar to Zoe and Tom's regarding the lack of professional development opportunities and guidance from leadership. She discussed it at length and shared how she had to independently seek out what she needed. Meredith shared this story,

> *I don't think it [professional development] was provided to me as like training or suggested by my administrators or anything like that. Unfortunately, I don't think like it's talked about enough, supported enough…like there weren't systems in place to like you*

know, I mean we like, you could seek out like trainings on like how to de-escalate, you know, behavior or things like that. But that was like done on your own time…I can get my hours done on these like, you know online courses that I like skate through 'cause I need to get them done in time to meet my requirement. But like, what am I really getting out of it? And even if they are on behavior management, they're still not like, it's not real, you know? I mean, it's again, it's like regurgitating what I've already heard a thousand times, and it's not, you know, in-the-moment experiences…So I did a lot of self-learning, like researching on my own, whether it was like reading text or searching out information, observing other teachers, and kind of discussions with colleagues, that kind of thing. I think it really had to be sought through self-reflection and things like that.

The experiences shared by these preschool teachers describe expectations that teachers need to know how to do it all while teaching alone: nurse a sick child, counsel a family in crisis, and teach a room full of young children 21st-century skills. As Meredith shared, *"…teachers are expected to meet a wide range of needs even though they are not given additional staff, training, and resources to do so."* Early education teachers are asked to create an inclusive, nurturing learning environment, support challenging behaviors, and accelerate learning for developmental delays.

Zoe, Tom, and Meredith have over 20 years of experience in the field, combined with education degrees, and attend annual professional development. *They* do not feel prepared but feel exhausted, anxious, and isolated. The negative impact of not feeling prepared on teachers' mental health is explored more in Finding Two.

Finding Two: Preschool teachers' feelings of isolation influence their ability to teach children with challenging behavior.

As highlighted within the theme found under guiding research question two, feeling isolated from others has a determinantal impact on teachers' self-esteem and, at times, supporting a child safely. Not all preschool teachers are part of a teaching dyad; if they are to be, that decision begins with how their leadership designs their individual program. There is no set guidance on program design from EEC other than minimum state regulations, which include the teacher-to-child ratio (Massachusetts Department of Early Education & Care; n.d.). As Meredith expressed, *"EEC doesn't give enough guidance at all. I mean, they're not there. I really don't think EEC affects how centers are run at all, aside from no corporal punishment."*

For example, within the three centers that Zoe, Tom, and Meredith teach in, all three experience a different teacher-to-child ratio. Zoe teaches with one teacher to seven or two teachers to fifteen children, while Tom teaches with one teacher to ten or two teachers to twenty children. Previously, Meredith taught with one teacher to twenty-five children in the public school, and now that she runs her own program, her ratio is much lower, at one teacher to five children. In Massachusetts, the minimum ratio required by EEC for preschool children ages 2.9 years to 5.11 years old is one teacher to ten children or two teachers to twenty children (Massachusetts Department of Early Education & Care, n.d.). All three preschool teachers acknowledge that teaching ten children alone is incredibly challenging, and they cannot give them the attention they would like. Referring to the story that Zoe shared before, her program asked a child to leave due to their inability to properly support their challenging behaviors because the classroom only had one teacher, and according to her, *"there definitely needed to be two people in the room."* Even if there is a chance of no challenging behaviors, a child who is

2.9 years old versus a child who is five years old is very different developmentally. These different age groups will naturally require fluctuating levels of attention, which one teacher among ten children will not be able to provide.

In their experience, it has been inconsistent *if* these teachers can access support. The inconsistent support could be due to not having enough teachers on staff or having leadership that is not available when they need help. Tom expressed this,

> *If I have to bring a child to say the office because they're just too much, and they're just causing so much disruption to the day, you know? Sometimes you get, sometimes I've been turned away, being told that, "You have to deal with this" or something to that extent. But then there's other days where they'll [director] let the child sit in the office and you know, the director will talk to them about their behaviors and what they're doing, and that stuff.*

Meredith has experienced a similar inconsistency as Tom. She shared her frustration when sharing that, at times, she felt administrators were unavailable to help. She shared,

> *And it's like, yeah, like, there isn't, it's like if a kid is being explosive or aggressive, or you know, totally disruptive and they need to be removed from the classroom setting, it's like again, it's like a staffing thing, right? Like you know, does the director have time to sit with the kid and work on those skills? Is there like staff available to work on that? Or is it like they're too busy too? So, it's like, they're sending, you know, the kids out of the classroom where they're doing the most, you know, I don't want to say like damage, right? And it's like, someone has to keep them busy…but what is the kid getting out of any of that, right?*

However, in Zoe's experience, the support she has received from her director has been more consistent. I will address this more in the third finding, but I feel it is also essential to highlight the variability across early learning centers here. Zoe described her director like this,

> *If there's a student with challenging behaviors, she is very involved, and she'll you know; if we have parent-teacher conferences, she always asks if we want her to be present. She is, she's wonderful. So, she also is a very experienced teacher who, um, has a lot of input but also like trusts us to make decisions, so it's very helpful.*

Building on what Zoe experiences brings up the question of resources: Does a program have adequate resources to provide the necessary support to teachers to prevent feelings of isolation and burnout? Meredith brought up these wonderings as she reflected,

> *I also think that behavior challenges occur because there isn't enough staff to adequately address children's individual social-emotional needs…So I guess it's like knowing what's going on, having the resources to, like, which is really like having people available to help support it, but no systems gonna work if there aren't enough bodies to support it.*

The lack of resources, whether in the form of physical teachers or literal support from leadership or budgets, to hire more teachers to even, as Meredith suggested, *"take a kid for a walk."* Enough support is crucial for teachers to feel successful at what they do and act as a buffer to burnout. Meredith did add that she knows that *"people do the best they can with the resources they have,"* and Zoe said that the cost of preschool is expensive and that could have an impact on resources, including receiving a livable wage (Chen & Phillips, 2018; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; McLean et al., 2019; Ruprecht, 2020; Sandilos et al., 2020; Schaack et al., 2020). To conclude, Zoe said, *"I mean, it would be great to be paid in a way that I feel was deserved."*

This data suggests internal and state policies experienced by participants create environments that promote feelings of isolation. Interviewed participants shared practices which included inconsistent support from leadership, with administration at times, *"turning a blind eye"* or *"so overextended that they don't have time,"* as Meredith described it, or being alone with ten children at a time, which is allowed under Massachusetts state regulations. Examining how Zoe, Tom, and Meredith face feelings of isolation and how those feelings impact their ability to provide a safe environment for their students shed light on the challenges found within the early education system. We know children thrive in safe and supportive learning environments (Cole et al., 2005; Cole et al., 2013; Post et al., 2020a; Ruprecht et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019) and teachers succeed when they have supports in place to not only do their jobs but engage in self-care (Cooper et al., 2017; Douglass et al., 2021; Sabol et al., 2018; Ziv et al., 2021; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Implications for policymakers will be discussed more in the following chapter.

Finding Three: When preschool teachers feel a sense of connectedness, their success, and satisfaction in the classroom increases.

Lastly, the third finding highlights what can go well within an early learning center when teachers feel connected and have opportunities to increase their competencies and collaborate with their teams. Even though their stories of being alone in a classroom with ten children and feeling unprepared to teach young children with challenging behavior or experiencing burnout, the interviewed preschool teachers still expressed the fulfillment they feel when experiencing a sense of connectedness. Zoe, Tom, and Meredith talked a lot about their co-teachers and how much more they learn when they have the chance to collaborate. There was a shift in their energy when they discussed moments of connection and, at times, excitement when they shared ideas

for creating more meaningful opportunities with other teachers in the field. Tom expressed how much he has learned from his co-teacher and director several times, and it was evident that he respects them and the knowledge they could share. Tom reflected on these moments,

> *So, the tools that I had learned when I started working they were actually given to me by my co-teacher. She told me about certain strategies and how she's used them and how they worked, and she told me they don't happen overnight, but they do eventually work*.

Tom continued, "*My director always says you always have to have that bag of tricks where you just pull out something out of the blue, like whether it be singing a song or redirection*." Zoe also shared how she and her colleagues work well together and how it differs significantly from her experience in public schools. Her story supports what she previously shared about learning more through experience and having support from her director. Zoe said,

> *So, it's [current center] definitely a lot more collaborative. And if somebody is having an issue with a child, they'll definitely, they'll talk about it with all the teachers, you know, do you have any suggestions? What do you think like, have you ever seen anything like this before? So, there's a lot more, like you can draw on everyone's experience, which is very helpful. I think just from a learning perspective, like to be able to hear other people's experiences and what they've done and what's worked and what hasn't and stuff like that.*

Zoe also reflected on the sense of community from the families in her classroom this year. Her face lit up when she shared this with me,

> *I feel like our parents are all very supportive. They're, you know, "Thank you so much for what you do," "We understand it's really hard", "I don't know how you do this all the time." And that is like as rewarding as anything. So, it's just, you know, nice to be recognized, and I do it 'cause I love it, and I don't know, I love watching these kids grow*

> *and seeing, like, at the beginning, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year how different they are. So yeah, feeling like I have a hand in it.*

Meredith shared that her *"strong team"* has a passionate belief in the mission of her program and the difference that buy-in has made (Cole et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2017; Pianta et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2018; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). She described her team as having extensive years in the field and showing robust skills in supporting children's needs. She adds, *"And I think all those things like combined as a joint effort, is helpful."* Another point that I noted from what Meredith shared about her program was teachers' ability to connect with children. This could be due to her low ratio of one teacher to five children and her team's shared understanding and buy-in. Meredith shared various strategies that they can implement with the *"time and space"* her program provides, including,

> *Depending on the child's age and skill set, I may model or prompt calming strategies like breathing or specific language in how to talk to a peer…we model and prompt children to "check-in," not simply saying an arbitrary "I'm sorry"…we brainstorm ways of how we can help fix a problem…We also use read-a-louds to help launch discussions about feelings, kindness, friendship, forgiveness, grit, and self-empowerment.*

The other area of connectedness that these teachers are yearning for is through professional development, which goes back to the barrier discussed in Finding One. These teachers said they learn the most from their experiences in the field. When asked what the early education field needs to keep teaching young children, their response was to provide more opportunities to connect with other teachers. Not only are they looking for meaningful professional development topics, but those opportunities should include the ability to observe, be

observed, and share feedback with one another because *"this is how ideas are passed on."* Tom shared his idea,

> *I'm under the belief that professional development should be ongoing. It should never stop because it's always something new to learn about this field, there's always new ideas, new strategies. And I think teachers always have something to share about challenging behaviors and different strategies and techniques some that others might not necessarily use or even know about.*

Needing to hear more and share more about challenging behavior is a widespread issue across the field, with only 20 percent of early education teachers receiving infrequent professional development on the topic of challenging behavior (Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Loomis, 2018). Meredith thought of visiting other centers during the school day to see what others do and learn from each other. She recognized that challenges with staffing and budget costs prevented her from embarking on this idea but felt it would be highly beneficial. Meredith described her brainstorm,

> *But if I go into a classroom and watch another teacher in the moment and I'm like, "Wow! That was really effective", you know, I can bring that back to my classroom, and I can really, you know, I can implement that. Or you know, seeing or having someone come and observe me and like say like, "Oh like I noticed this worked and this didn't," and like feeling have that ability to be honest and open about it...*

This feeling of connectedness could buffer the effects of burnout just as a warm and responsive relationship with one caring adult could buffer the impacts of adversity for a child (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Tebben et al., 2021). We know that a person who is rich in relational health has more satisfaction in life versus someone with relational poverty (Hambrick et al., 2018b;

Perry & Winfrey, 2021). The key to supporting young children displaying challenging behavior begins with a teacher who feels connected to their early learning community, feels psychologically safe, and understands trauma's impact on learning (Cole et al., 2013). Resources provided before and after the start of teaching service are needed so that teachers do not feel isolated, not only from their immediate peers during a crisis but isolated in their feelings of personal defeat when it has been a hard day in the classroom.

Chapter Discussion

This chapter reviewed the complete analysis process I engaged in to uncover themes and significant findings from the data. Three themes emerged, answering my first guiding research question: (1) *"They just won't do it,"* (2) *"Other kids need attention too,"* and (3) *"They're so young."* The more prominent theme that emerged when answering my second guiding research question was (4) *"It's exhausting,"* with a subcategory of *Teachers' Energy Impacts the Classroom Community*.

The teachers who spoke with me conveyed knowledge of child development and understanding of influences on behavior that are out of children's control. They perceive challenging behavior as difficult to manage and behavior requiring more attention than they can provide. Not being able to give this attention causes an internal struggle for them. They expressed personal defeat and burnout due to the exhaustion of teaching alone and not having the support they needed to teach children safely.

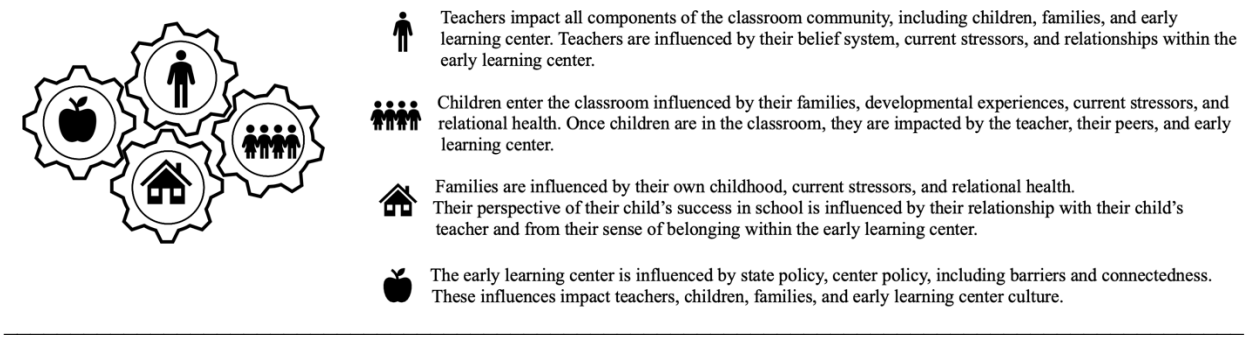
The three significant findings that emerged from the four themes illustrate what we know from research in the field. There are extreme variations regarding higher education requirements and certification processes, variations in how early learning settings are designed, and leadership styles are found within. Without enough resources to access, including enough teachers on staff,

meaningful professional development, and ongoing support, teachers will feel isolated and likely begin to feel burnout. These feelings impact their ability to establish close relationships with children and teach successfully. Finally, teachers feel the most successful when they have a sense of fulfillment. This comes from having opportunities to learn from meaningful professional development and, most importantly, a community to lean on for collaboration and strength when the day in the classroom has been long.

Each layer of the early learning center (children, families, early learning center, teacher) influences the next, just like a set of gears. One part moves the next, which directly influences the other, and so on. Figure 3 illustrates the connection and power of influence found between the teacher, children, families, and early learning center.

Figure 3

Ecological systems found within an early learning center.



Note. Created by the author, Stapleton, E. (2024) for this dissertation.

Figure 3 demonstrates that relationships matter. It is hard to separate each individual within an early learning center from the next. How teachers, children, families, and leadership show up each day will directly influence the success of children's developmental outcomes. Understanding that relationships begin with the teacher's relationship with themselves is critical. Early education teachers must be aware and supported to engage in ongoing self-care and

professional learning to be fully present and available to build close relationships with young children.

The stories shared by Zoe, Tom, and Meredith are authentic, personal, and honest. Listening to them and talking with them was an exciting experience for me. Although I knew I was entering this research project with insider status, I wondered how much of my lived experiences would come from participants' experiences. Not only did that happen, but their experiences echo what we know from research. How we show up in a learning space is influenced by the ecological systems we belong to, and the close relationships we make can buffer stressors in our lives.

Chapter Five: Summary and Implications

We can't continue to blame teachers and the most vulnerable students for policies and practices over which they have little control. ~ Dr. Sonia Nieto

Childhood maltreatment is prevalent (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], n.d.; National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2019; The Children's Bureau at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023) and this impacts children's learning and behavior (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2016a; Connell et al., 2018; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015; Howes et al., 2013; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995 Post et al., 2020b; Ziv et al., 2021). Teachers are a critical piece in building safe learning environments and close relationships with children (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Chen et al., 2021; Cole et al., 2005; Jerome et al., 2009; Moen et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019; Pianta et al., 2016; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Vu, 2015; Zee et al., 2020).

After spending two decades in the field of early education and experiencing vast differences among early learning centers, colleagues, and children, I was troubled by the lack of voice we (teachers and students) have regarding policies that support our work and learning. I also had the privilege of teaching young children who had been "asked to leave," in other words, expelled from other early learning centers. Those children hold a special place in my heart for many reasons, including what they taught me about life and how to be the teacher they needed. Yet, I worry about other children with similar experiences who are not only expelled from preschool but who are not able to re-enroll at early learning centers with teachers who teach with a trauma-sensitive perspective and anti-bias philosophy. I worry about other teachers who are

burnt out and leave the field because they do not know how to support these young children and are not receiving the help they need.

My intention behind this scholarship was to develop a stronger voice for children and teachers. I set out to learn as much as I could about the impact traumatic stress has on brain development and, thus, young children's learning and what could buffer those stressful experiences. I learned how relationships are the key ingredient in a child's life, and research in attachment and ecological systems theories, and the field of traumatology supports this. Once I had this information, I knew I had to design a study that could begin to shed light on what is preventing children from being supported by teachers who view their challenging behavior as a need to increase skills versus malicious behavior. Therefore, my study was designed to gain an understanding of preschool teachers' perceptions of challenging behavior, their belief systems surrounding where this behavior comes from, and how relationships might be impacted by this behavior in their classrooms. Since my epistemology is influenced by relational constructivism, I believe that all perceptions or beliefs are rooted in how a person has interacted with the world and whom they have interacted with. This study uncovers how participating preschool teachers learned how to teach, including strategies to support children's challenging behaviors. In knowing this, a deeper understanding was gained of how effective pre-service preparatory programs and in-service professional development are; understanding how preschool teachers perceive challenging behavior sheds light on the gaps in teachers' pre-service and in-service training, what they need in the field for support, and how organizational norms inform a teacher's pedagogical choices. The insights generated from this study can inform future early education programs to be safe, supportive, and welcoming for all children, regardless of their behavior.

Study Methods

This sequential mixed methods study used phenomenological methods to answer these guiding research questions:

1. What are preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behavior within their classrooms?
2. How does challenging behavior impact relationships between children and teachers in an early learning setting?

Limitations

Limitations include my positionality as an early education professional. This identity has become so entwined with how I view the world that it is impossible to fully extract it from my identity as a researcher. I acknowledge my privilege in the areas of race and education. To mitigate the limitations brought by this positionality, I had to bracket held assumptions and biases (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I purposefully identified early learning settings that fall outside the region where I live and work.

The study included a purposeful participant sample of preschool teachers and assistants working in licensed community-based early learning centers from Plymouth County, Massachusetts. The constraint of generalization of data is due to a limited sample size of 30 survey respondents and interview sample size of three. Due to the limited sample size from a specific region within Massachusetts, the collected data do not represent the entire preschool teacher population within Massachusetts or beyond. The analysis is limited to understanding the experiences of those who participated in this study; therefore, causality cannot be found.

Discussion

Defining Challenging Behavior

The survey and interview data analysis led to the themes that helped answer my research questions. In answering the first guiding research question, *What are preschool teachers' perceptions of children's challenging behavior within their classrooms?* Three themes emerged during qualitative analysis: (1) "They just won't do it," (2) "Other Kids Need Attention Too," and (3) "They're so young."

Preschool teachers in this study (n=30) selected *impulsivity, neediness,* and *defiance* as the most challenging behaviors. Challenging behavior was defined as "*behaviors … difficult to predict or manage… behaviors that are not easily remedied by … redirection …, distraction, or reminders."*

"They just won't do it."

Preschool teachers perceive challenging behavior to be difficult to manage. They described this behavior as defiant or as children who *"just say no"* or who will not participate in an expected transition or activity.

Early childhood is a time when young children begin to assert themselves and their independence. Behavior that is characterized as defiant is therefore expected within preschool classrooms and is a common experience throughout the early education field (Aksoy, 2020; Alamos et al., 2022; Alink et al., 2006; Blankson et al., 2013; Carlson & Wang, 2007; Campbell et al., 2016b; Kalb & Leober, 2003; Mittal et al., 2013; Mondi et al., 2022; Onchwari & Keengew, 2011; Tayler, 2015; Wiebe et al., 2011; Westling, 2010).

"Other kids need attention too."

Challenging behavior requires more attention from a teacher and gains more attention from peers. Teachers describe this behavior as impulsive or needy. The preschool teachers focused on the time this form of behavior took them to support or how it caused other children within the classroom to "mimic" the behavior. A participant describes this issue, *"They … are seeking adult assistance…need like that extra emotional help…Or they wanna be held…but … there are other kids that need attention too, so that can be difficult."*

Research (Alamos et al., 2022; Blankson et al., 2013; Carlson & Wang, 2007; Campbell et al., 2016b; Cole et al., 2009; Denham et al., 2012; Jerome et al., 2009; Mittal et al., 2013; Onchwari & Keengew, 2011; Tayler, 2015; Wiebe et al., 2011) suggests young children are often impulsive due to their immature executive function skills and their immature capacity to modulate their emotions in social situations. Due to young children's reliance on adults around them to co-regulate their emotions and their inability to inhibit their reactions when attempting to access preferred items or responses in social situations, it is then expected for behavior that requires more adult attention to be prevalent within preschool classrooms.

"They're so young."

The preschool teachers in this study acknowledged the impact undeveloped skills, the new experience of attending preschool *"because for many children…preschool is their first experience away from their families",* and potentially traumatic events have on children's behavior. The belief system these preschool teachers shared held experience or lack of experience at the root of children's behavior, *not* the child. This is an important distinction because it takes the responsibility off the child to "behave" and places it on the teacher to teach the needed skills to the child. Participants shared their beliefs, saying,

I find that a lot of challenging behavior can also be speech related, like whether they haven't developed the language yet or ah, and they just get frustrated…so just a combination of being young, being out of the house, not having appropriate or not having developed language skills that would help [their behavior].

Child maltreatment is a widespread problem, with one in four children experiencing adversity (AAP, n.d.), so it is no surprise the children enrolled in these participants' preschool classrooms have experienced known and unknown trauma. Another participant added, *"We've had kids that have seen trauma, and we've seen kids that are going through a rough time. So, they do tend to showcase a bit more of those challenging behaviors."*

Children who experience or witness one or multiple traumatic event(s) or ongoing adversities are likely to display behaviors that are manifestations of their stress response system being activated. Externalizing behaviors that might be present include the inability to self-regulate, self-destructive behavior, aggression, difficulty sleeping, an inability or challenges attaching to others, regression in previously acquired skills, withdrawal or dissociation, heightened arousal, hypervigilance, and academic challenges, including language delays in early childhood. Internalizing behaviors which might be present include issues such as depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, intrusive thoughts, low self-esteem, and phobias (AAP, n.d.; Alamos et al., 2022; Anda et al., 2006; Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Blehar et al., 1977; Blewitt et al., 2020; Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2016a; Campbell et al., 2016b; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Cole et al., 2005; Connell et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2017; Crane et al., 2013; Gaskill & Perry, 2012; Hambrick et al., 2018a; Hambrick et al., 2018b; Holmes et al., 2015; Holmes et al., 2018, Howes et al., 2013; Hur et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2014; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2009; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; Lippard et al., 2018; Ludy-Dobson &

Perry, 2010; Moen et al., 2019; NCTSN, 2019; Perry et al., 1995; Perry, 1997; Perry, 2002; Perry & Pollard, 1998; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020b; Post et al., 2020a; Oosterman et al., 2010; Sabol et al., 2018; Sroufe, 2005; The Children's Bureau at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Vu, 2015; Westerberg et al., 2020; Wolcott et al., 2019; Ziv et al., 2021; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

The preschool teachers in this study understand that influences beyond young children's control can directly impact their behavior and development, showing an awareness and sensitivity in their teaching practice. One participant reflected, "*I imagine any sort of scary experience or thing that upsets their equilibrium can have that sort of effect on a three-year-old who feels like they don't control anything… lead[ing] to behavior that would be challenging*."

Relationships

In answering my second guiding research question, *How does challenging behavior impact relationships between children and teachers in an early learning setting*? One theme and subcategory emerged during qualitative analysis: (4) "It's exhausting," and Teacher Energy Impacts the Classroom Community.

Quantitative analysis of survey results yielded a moderate negative correlation between the two variables, closeness and conflict Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) Short Form subscale mean scores. This suggests that the remaining subscale will decrease as closeness or conflict scores increase. When participants scored within the mid to high range of closeness, they were also likely to score in the mid to low range in conflict, even with the presence of challenging behavior, indicating that within this sample of preschool teachers, their relationships with their students would be considered sources of support.

Some mixed analysis dispelled an assumption I held when entering the study by revealing that survey respondents who scored within the high closeness range had various educational backgrounds, while survey respondents who scored within the high conflict range all held degrees. This data suggests that holding a degree did not positively influence a teacher's perceived relationship with a child for this small sample.

"It's exhausting."

In these participants' experiences, their feelings of isolation and personal defeat because they did not have the support to do their jobs were overwhelmingly centered when answering how challenging behavior impacts relationships in their classrooms. It was clear that the relationship challenging behavior impacted the most was with themselves. One participant shared,

> *It [challenging behavior] affects the teacher too, because, say, a behavior is ongoing, and it happens every single day, but if a teacher's like burnt out, and they don't have any help like, if they're in a classroom, all by themselves with ten children, that can definitely cause a bit of anxiety for the teacher if they don't have like a teacher in the classroom next door, or if the director is busy doing something else, and they don't have that support to help manage the child.*

Research supports the positive implications that a fulfilled preschool teacher directly influences the emotional atmosphere of their classroom. Preschool teachers have an emotionally and physically taxing job. They are supporting young children with a wide range of skills and backgrounds. Suppose a teacher feels exhausted from being alone in a classroom or has little support from leadership or other staff. In that case, their sense of self will be negatively affected. This internal negative outlook can influence a teacher's perceptions of children and their families,

impacting their ability to form close relationships with children, lean on colleagues, and feel successful in their classrooms.

Therefore, if a teacher feels burnt out, the emotional climate in the classroom will be directly influenced. Burnout is a widespread problem in early education, with a lack of resources and livable wages perpetuating the feeling of being undervalued. In addition, children learning in a classroom with a dominant conflictual atmosphere will have increased challenges making connections with peers and teachers, even if their behavior is not identified as challenging. On the other hand, if children are in a classroom which is marked by closeness, children will show gains in their academic competencies and take more risks in their learning (Aksoy, 2020; Alamos et al., 2022; Anthonysamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Beeghly & Cicchetti, 1994; Blewitt et al., 2020; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Chen et al., 2021; Cole et al., 2005; Cooper et al., 2017; Crane et al., 2013; Eismann et al., 2020; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014b; Gilliam et al., 2016; Giordano et al., 2021; Glover Gagnon et al. 2019; Goodvin et al., 2008; Hamre et al., 2008; Howes et al., 2013; Hur et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2014; Jerome et al., 2009; Kelly et al., 1996; Li & Julian, 2012; Lippard et al., 2018; Masten, 2009; Moen et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Ontai & Thompson, 2002; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020a; Post et al., 2020b; Recchia, 2012; Ruprecht, 2020; Sabol et al., 2018; Schaack et al., 2020; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Vu, 2015; Westerberg et al., 2020; Wolcott et al., 2019; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

Significant Findings

In addition to these themes, three significant findings emerged during the analysis. These findings inform implications for community members and future research.

Finding One: Preschool teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach children with challenging behavior.

Even with college degrees, preschool teachers within this sample do not feel prepared to teach and support children with challenging behaviors. One participant gave this explanation,

> *I think that a lot of teachers probably aren't prepared to dealt with challenging behaviors. They might not necessarily have the skills to do so. They may have taken classes on challenging behaviors, and they might be thinking to themselves, "Oh, a challenging behavior isn't gonna happen. I won't have to do this at all.' But then they go into a classroom, and they find out that they have, let's say, ten kids with challenging behaviors, and they're like, 'Whoa! I was not prepared for this".*

The participants in this study expressed learning the most from on-the-ground experience versus what was taught to them through college coursework. In their experiences, courses were focused on structuring their daily schedule and curriculum, with little attention to special education and even less on challenging behavior. In hindsight, these participants feel they would have benefited from direct instruction surrounding challenging behavior, why it often occurs, and evidence-based strategies to support these children. The safe and supportive strategies they shared show they have learned evidence-based techniques and theories through self-directed learning.

However, suppose participants' experiences can be assumed to be that of many more. In that case, preschool teachers are set up to begin their careers on a never-ending cycle of learning as they go instead of entering their classrooms feeling prepared to teach on day one. National data confirms this finding, which shows the variability of training needed before becoming a certified early education teacher (Ai et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2020; Connors-Burrow et al.,

2017; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020b; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Schaack et al., 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

Across the U.S., there is extreme variability in requirements for early education teacher certification, with studies indicating that those teachers who attend higher education institutions are completing courses on varying topics. What is also clear, are those teachers who do participate in professional development specifically focused on the subject of trauma and its impact on learning show an increase in confidence in their teaching skills, whereas traditional course topics surrounding curriculum and daily structure have shown to not increase teachers abilities to form close relationships with students and thus, have a more successful classroom environment (Ai et al., 2022; Attwood et al., 2021; Blewitt et al., 2020; Buettner et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2021; Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2017; Douglass et al., 2021; Haslip & Gullo; 2018; Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019; Holmes et al., 2015; Howes et al., 2013; Hur et al., 2016; Jamil et al., 2022; Lippard et al., 2018; Lipscomb et al., 2019; Loomis, 2018**;** Moen et al., 2019; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Pianta et al., 2016; Perry & Daniels, 2016; Post et al., 2020b; Rucker et al., 2023; Sabol et al., 2018; Schaack et al., 2020; Snell et al., 2012; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Westling, 2010; Wolcott et al., 2019; Ziv et al., 2021; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

The experiences of this sample of preschool teachers highlight concerns regarding higher education and the professionalism of early education. For example, the regulatory department in Massachusetts, the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), requires all teachers, assistant teachers, and leaders to complete an annual requirement of 20 hours of professional development, with five of those hours focused on special education (Massachusetts Department of Early Education & Care, n.d.). However, no cohesive system is in place to access meaningful

and accessible professional development. Unfortunately, this can be found across the U.S. (Buettner et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2021; Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Jamil et al., 2022; Loomis, 2018; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Rucker et al., 2023). In addition, there are no penalties in Massachusetts if early education professionals do not complete the required professional development hours, which suggests a lack of professionalism expected from teachers and leaders alike.

Finding Two: Preschool teachers' feelings of isolation influence their ability to teach children with challenging behavior.

Feelings of isolation were prominent throughout interviews with participants. It was a feeling that continued to come through when discussing how challenging behavior impacts relationships and perceptions of challenging behavior. This sense of being alone – literally or symbolically – painted an image of how hard teaching preschoolers can be. One teacher instructing ten preschoolers by themselves is tough, and if they do not have a director or colleague who can step in and support them, the feeling of personal defeat can take over. I gained a sense of frustration at times during interviews with participants, especially when they described strategies they knew would support a child having a hard day but could not implement the approach because they did not have any help. During a few points during conversations, participants referenced feeling burnt out and how this internal conflict impacted their practice. One participant reflected, *"It makes you doubt yourself as a teacher. It makes you feel less effective makes you feel burnt out. And it's, you know, a struggle to keep your motivation."*

Burnout can be defined as exhaustion, poor job performance, interpersonal conflict, adverse health outcomes, absenteeism, job dissatisfaction, depression, irritability, and leaving employment (Ducharme et al., 2007). Without adequate resources, early education teachers will

probably feel burnout. Teaching in isolation, whether without a co-teacher or needed support from leadership, being alone each day will increase the likelihood that the emotional climate in a classroom will take a negative turn. This can be directly traced back to the energy a teacher brings into their classroom, which will significantly influence their ability to form close relationships with their students and their student's families (Cooper et al., 2017; Chen et al. 2021; Chen & Phillips, 2018; Douglass et al., 2021; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014a; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014b; Hamre et al., 2008; Hur et al., 2016; Nicholson & Reifel, 2011; Pianta et al., 2016; Post et al., 2020b; Recchia, 2012; Ruprecht, 2020; Sabol et al., 2018; Sandilos et al., 2020; Schaack et al., 2020; Ziv et al., 2021; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

Finding Three: When preschool teachers feel a sense of connectedness, their success, and satisfaction in the classroom increases.

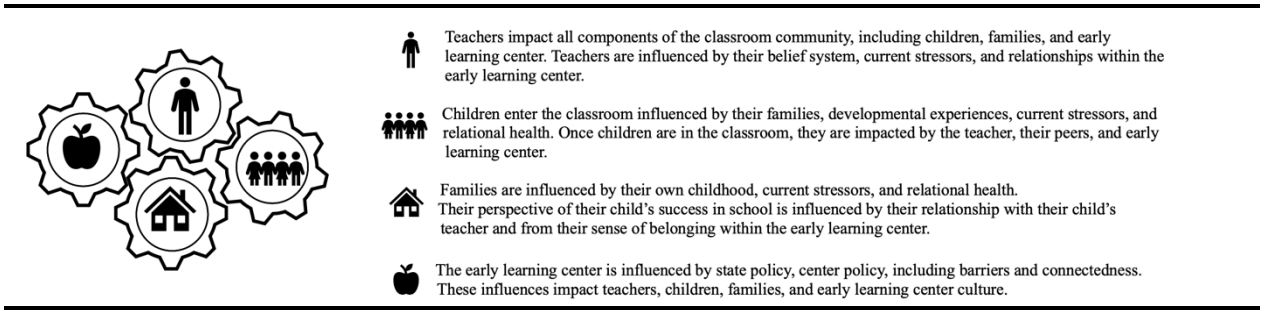
Interview participants shared their sense of fulfillment when they had opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, observe others, and discuss shared experiences—the moments of connection allowed participants to be a part of a professional community, which fed positivity into their practice. Participants' demeanors changed when talking about learning with and from others, and their excitement was evident. These experiences are meaningful to them, and they shared their strong desire to have more opportunities to collaborate with other early education teachers within their communities. One participant shared, "*You can draw on everyone's experience, which is very helpful. I think just from a learning perspective, to be able to hear other people's experiences, what they've done, what's worked, and what hasn't.*"

The data from this study illustrates the importance of relationships. Teacher perceptions, skills, and relationships are impacted by their pre-service preparation, the policies governing their work environments, and the ongoing opportunities to interact with colleagues and families.

Children are influenced by their family system, including their home culture and the community in which they are raised. Their development is also influenced by their peers and teachers with whom they have ongoing relationships. State policies and funding sources influence early learning centers, and families are impacted by extended family systems, community, stressors, and government. To demonstrate the reciprocal nature of relationships within an early learning center and how each individual does not stand alone, I created an image of four interlocking gears, each representing a different source of influence. As one source of influence grows or changes, the next source is thereby moved. In other words, changes within one source directly impact the following source and so on, as shown in the image in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Ecological systems found within an early learning center.



Note. Created by the author, Stapleton, E. (2024) for this dissertation.

As demonstrated in Figure 3, relationships matter. It is hard to separate each individual within an early learning center from the next. How teachers, children, families, and leadership show up each day will directly influence the success of children's developmental outcomes.

Implications

Recommendations for Early Education Teachers

I hope this study reminds early education teachers that they are not alone. The feelings and experiences they go through, as shown through the results of this study and reviewed

literature, are common, for better or for worse. However, in that commonality, I would encourage early education teachers to find community with one another. Teaching young children is hard work but an incredibly vital part of young children's development. Showing up each day, even after a difficult day at school, takes strength and commitment.

I would also encourage early education teachers to talk to one another, share their feelings, and brainstorm ways to collaborate, support each other more, and learn more about what our young students need. Until leadership and policymakers catch up with best practices, it will be up to them to initiate systems change. It can be done; the participants who shared their stories in this study are great examples of what can change with the drive to learn more and take risks to ask for help. As the famous quote, "Knowledge is power," suggests, the more you know, the more you will understand and influence your decisions.

Understanding young children by nature are impulsive, at times defiant, require more attention as they learn to regulate their emotions, and are impacted by so many things that are out of their control should put early educators at ease. Young children are not setting out to make anyone's day more difficult. They are curious, want to explore and be silly. Young children rely on their teachers to model how to process big emotions, increase their executive function skills, and teach them so much as they rapidly attempt to try new things all at once. These are huge tasks that young children are undertaking, and it is our privilege as early education teachers to be a part of children's lives as they develop these skills and to be a safe set of arms for them if they need us.

Lastly, I would encourage early education teachers to be kind to themselves. This study added to our knowledge of the importance of self-care. It is hard to be patient when our needs are unmet. I urge early education teachers to take time for themselves and learn techniques and

forms of mindfulness to help support themselves in moments of dysregulation so that they can show up each day for their students ready to teach.

Research suggests that just as a loving and predictable environment can support an infant and young child to develop a healthy stress response, a work environment that is predictable and psychologically safe can decrease a teacher's stress level. Increasing teacher self-regulation increases the ability to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for children. Human beings are social by nature and seek out connections with others. Teachers feel less isolated and burnt out when there is a sense of community, shared vision, and understanding of why they are doing the work. This will lead to positive outcomes for the children in their classrooms (Albin-Clark et al., 2018; Atallha et al., 2019; Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Cole et al., 2005; Cole et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2017; Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Hambrick et al., 2018b; Hamre et al., 2008; Holmes et al., 2015; Hur et al., 2016; Loomis, 2018; Morgan et al., n.d.; Perry & Winfrey, 2021; Pianta et al., 2016; Ruprecht, 2020; Sabol et al., 2018; Schaack et al., 2020; Senge et al., 2012; Tebben et al., 2021; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Vu, 2015; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

Recommendations for Leaders

Having been in a leadership position for many years, I understand firsthand how stressful this job is. I believe this study highlights this as well. While the focus of the study was not directly on leadership, I think it pointed out the challenges in running an early learning center with only peripheral guidance from state regulations and scarce budgets. However, it is still imperative for leaders to understand that they are charged with ensuring the health and safety of the children enrolled in their program and the health and safety of their teachers.

Policy, procedures, and norms begin with leadership. Leaders must establish an organizational culture that values and seeks the voices of teachers, children, and families to inform practice. Leaders need to understand the impact adversity has on children and families and the impact vicarious trauma has on teachers. I would encourage leadership to create spaces within their centers that promote relaxation and mindfulness, such as a garden or break space, where teachers may go when they have lunch or need to take a few minutes away from children to regulate themselves. I would encourage leaders to ask *and* listen to what teachers are excited about, what they are yearning to know more about, and how to provide those opportunities.

Lastly, I would strongly urge leaders to use their voices with policymakers. Although it is essential for policymakers to hear what teachers say, leadership is often in a position to get their voices to the front. Speak to state legislation. Speak to licensing and governing agencies about making changes that best support our teachers and young students. It is time for the system to be recreated by those who have worked and lived it.

Recommendations for Policymakers. The information brought to the surface in this study adds to the literature already accessible by policymakers. The experiences shared by participants in this study are not unique, meaning the available literature already highlights inadequate wages, lack of resources, and rampant burnout across the early education field. The available literature is also very clear about the impact trauma has on development, how widespread the issue is, and how vulnerable a child is during the first five years of their life. Research points out the importance of connection and relationships and the power those relationships have in buffering potentially traumatic events. We also know from research that humans are social creatures, with an evolutionary history of four adults caring for one child. Yet we are asking preschool teachers to teach ten children alone, possibly ranging in ages from 2.9

years to 5.11 years, with increased developmental differences and needs. This model is unsafe and not in the best interest of children.

Turning away from data only increases challenges for teachers, children, and families. If young children do not have a safe and supportive learning environment to attend, they are at risk for an unsatisfactory early learning experience, suspension, or expulsion, which, in turn, will negatively impact their outlook on learning as they enter elementary school. Unsupportive learning experiences have the potential to cause academic and social setbacks for them as they grow, which increases their likelihood of engaging in risky behavior and poor relationships and work performance later in life.

Recent initiatives in Massachusetts, such as the Early Childhood Career Pathways Grant, Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) grants, and Gateway to Pre-K, are valuable and should continue. The issue with these initiatives is that they do not solve the concerns expressed in this study. The Early Childhood Career Pathways Grant allows early educators to complete some college courses for free; however, there is no guarantee that the classes will be designed to support learning in trauma and challenging behavior. The Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) grant is a wonderful initiative that could potentially increase wages and decrease some overhead for community-based early learning centers. However, this does not solve the issue of not having enough teachers in the field or enough teachers to support each other, especially since the state allows such high student-to-teacher ratios. The Gateway to Pre-K initiative was just announced at the date of this dissertation, so without the program coming to fruition, it is hard to comment entirely. Still, my hesitation surrounding this initiative is there are not enough high-quality early learning centers to meet the demands this initiative boasts it will.

I strongly urge policymakers to start small. Instead of wide-sweeping initiatives, begin with the regulations that govern licensing requirements, primarily lowering the student-to-teacher ratio and requiring adequate non-child work time to plan and prepare curricula and environment. Begin with demanding more from pre-service teachers, including requiring more than one 3-credit college course to become a certified teacher. Preparation takes more than that; teaching is an art form, and it is insulting to children and families that the only requirements their teacher must meet are to pass a criminal background check and earn a "C" grade in one child development course. Considering the lack of required preparation, we cannot expect early education teachers to know and implement evidence-based practices that can support young children's learning, have an awareness of the widespread issue of child maltreatment, and the importance of relationships. In addition, we cannot expect early education teachers to have the time to research, learn, and prepare to implement engaging and meaningful curricula and strategies when they are not provided with state-mandated daily or weekly planning time. Yet, we *do* expect all of this from early education teachers without any support from the top down. Young children cannot learn the skills they need in learning environments that are rampant with stress. Children and teachers deserve more from us.

If the literature surrounding traumatology, child development, and ecological systems holds weight in academic circles, why do the early education system policies not reflect the research? To truly offer early education that is safe and supportive by a workforce that is not burnt out, it will be essential for policymakers and early education leaders to consider these recommendations in the areas of early education teacher preparation and mental health.

Recommendations for Pre-Service Early Education Programs. The teachers interviewed do not feel prepared. Although this study focuses on a small sample of preschool

teachers, each holds a degree and felt their higher education was not focused on the "why" behind children's behavior, which, in hindsight, they think would have prepared them better. Courses focused on the prevalence of trauma in childhood, how potentially traumatic events impact children's development, how to create a safe and supportive classroom environment with close relationships, as well as understanding the impact of vicarious trauma and self-care strategies would have been extremely helpful to them. In other words, courses must prepare teachers to be attachment-aware and trauma-sensitive.

It is also clear that pre-service teacher education needs to include on-the-ground training; in other words, teachers need to "see and do" to learn, just like many fields that require apprenticeship and hands-on training. Experience brings knowledge, and having the ability to collaborate and learn from veteran teachers in the field would be invaluable to pre-service teachers. Higher education programs should include more pre-service practicum experiences focusing directly on behavior supports, not just curricula and daily structure, and in-service coaching during a teacher's first year in the classroom. These suggestions would benefit leadership preparation as well. Often, lead teachers become directors, and novice leaders would also greatly benefit from pre-service practice and in-service coaching, just as pre-service principals receive for public school licensure.

We know children thrive when they feel safe and supported and can rely on at least one adult in their lives. We also know that young children are developing rapidly and do not yet master executive function and emotion regulation skills. Therefore, pre-service teachers must be taught to expect challenging behaviors, when to be concerned, and how to provide a learning environment that supports optimal development. If that happened, we would send novice teachers into classrooms with the knowledge they need to succeed right from the start and

preschool children to kindergarten who are likely to be more positive, socially adjusted, and ready to learn. We would have teachers who we could retain in the field for the long term, teachers who feel competent, successful, and fulfilled in their jobs.

It is time that the two systems of state regulation and higher education listen to what preschool teachers say about what they need to be the best teachers they can be for their young students. Coursework should include not only intersections of child development and early education but also specific courses on trauma and attachment sensitivity, how to create a safe and supportive learning environment as well as how to engage in ongoing self-care, as self-care is a critical part of teaching due to the potential vicarious trauma teachers experience (Cooper et al., 2017; Douglass et al., 2021; Holmes et al., 2015; Lipscomb et al., 2019; Perry & Daniels, 2016; Sabol et al., 2018; Snell et al., 2012; Ziv et al., 2021; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

Implications for Future Research

This study contributes to the literature in a few ways. Very few of the more than two hundred research publications I read were mixed methods (Attwood et al., 2021; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Qualitative research adds a humanizing element to data and can elevate participants' voices. Allowing preschool teachers to add their voices directly to the literature is essential. Their voices are often unheard, evident through their low wages, long work hours, and high demands of their jobs. My study focuses on preschool teachers' lived experiences, which can tell a needed story to policymakers and other community members. This study adds essential topics of feelings of isolation and burnout to the literature, which could help shape regulations surrounding student-to-teacher ratios.

However, due to the small sample size of my study, future research should focus on gaining a more extensive sample so generalization of preschool teachers' experiences can begin.

Using a larger sample would be an essential step in adding to the understanding of how higher education preparatory programs are designed, as well as individual early learning center practices surrounding professional development. Elevating more voices could bring the attention of policymakers, which both early education teachers and children so desperately need.

Conclusion

The importance of the early years of a child's life is evident. We know the prevalence of child maltreatment and the impacts it can have on young children's development. We also know that young children naturally have immature executive function and emotional regulation. Therefore, it is time for society to begin to make changes that will significantly and positively impact the lives of all our youngest students. Changes start with preparing early education teachers to be successful in the classroom by training them to be attachment-aware and trauma-sensitive, providing enough support and funding so that early education teachers do not feel isolated and have the ability to establish warm and close relationships with all of the children in their classrooms.

Appendix A

Online Survey

1. What is your current position in early education?
    a. If you are **not** currently teaching preschool age (2.9-5 years), please end the survey.
2. How many hours per week do you teach?
3. How many years have you been teaching in the field of early education?
4. What is your current level of education?
5. Have you had experience teaching young children with challenging behavior?
    a. If you answered no, please end the survey. Thank you for your time.
    b. If you answered yes, please continue to question 6.
6. Keeping a child in mind which you believe has challenging behavior, please answer the following section (STRS-Short Form):

STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP SCALE – SHORT FORM

Please reflect on the degree to which each of the following statements applied to your relationship with this child. Using the scale below, circle the appropriate number for each item.

Definitely does not apply 1	Not really 2	Neutral, not sure 3	Applies somewhat 4	Definitely applies 5

1.	I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	If upset, this child will seek comfort from me.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	This child is uncomfortable with physical affection or touch from me.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	This child values his/her relationship with me.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	When I praise this child, he/she beams with pride.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	This child spontaneously shares information about himself/herself.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	This child easily becomes angry with me.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	It is easy to be in tune with what this child is feeling.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	This child remains angry or is resistant after being disciplined.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Dealing with this child drains my energy	1	2	3	4	5
12.	When this child is in a bad mood, I know we're in for a long and difficult day.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	This child's feelings toward me can be unpredictable or can change suddenly.	1	2	3	4	5

14.	This child is sneaky or manipulative with me.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	This child openly shares his/her feelings and experiences with me.	1	2	3	4	5

7. **Here are some common behaviors that early education teachers report in their classrooms:**

Dysregulated	Needy	Socially withdrawn	Connection seeking	Talking out of turn
Noncompliant	Defiant	Overwhelmed	Too much energy	Impulsive
Meltdowns	Aggressive	Talking too loud	Needs high levels of teacher support	

Pick the top five behaviors that you see in your classroom. Using the scale below, indicate the corresponding number which applies for each item. Write in the behavior and the corresponding number on the scale.

Never a Problem Always a Problem
1_____2_____3_____4_____5

a. Behavior _____ Scale _____
b. Behavior _____ Scale _____
c. Behavior _____ Scale _____
d. Behavior _____ Scale _____
e. Behavior _____ Scale _____

8. Would you be interested in participating in a follow-up focus group to share more about your experiences with challenging behaviors?
____No thank you, not at this moment. Thank you for your support.
____Yes, I would like to volunteer to participate in a follow-up focus group.

If yes: First name _____ Email _____

9. Optional: Which of the following best describe you? Select all that apply.
White ___ Black or African American ____ Latino or Hispanic ___ Asian ___Other ___
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander ___Native American or Alaska Native____

10. Optional: Which of the following genders do you most identify with?
Female ___ Male ____ Nonbinary ___ Questioning ___ Prefer Not to Say ____

Appendix B

Online Survey Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research project titled *Understanding Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Challenging Behavior*. The intent of this research study is to identify attitudes, strengths, and limitations in the field of early education to identify implications for training, research, and practice. Your participation will entail answering 26 questions and should take no longer than 25 minutes.

Your participation is voluntary, and your answers will remail strictly confidential. You are free to choose not to participate in the research and to discontinue your participation in the research at any time by quitting the survey. If any problem in connection to the survey or if you have questions about the research, please contact the researchers:

Elizabeth Stapleton: estaple2@lesley.edu or 508.367.0304
Patricia Crain de Garlace, PhD.: pcrainde@lesley.edu

There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairperson at irb@lesley.edu.

Participation in this online questionnaire by clicking "next" will constitute consent.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol for Understanding Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Challenging Behavior

In an effort to establish rapport and be respectful of the respondent's rights, the interviewer will begin by introducing herself, reviewing the purposes of the research, reminding the respondent of the voluntary nature of the interview, that participants have the right to terminate their participation at any time without penalty, and ensuring confidentiality. The interviewer will inform participants that the session will be recorded.

The purpose of this research is to speak with you - preschool teachers - to gain an understanding of your perceptions of teaching young children who demonstrate challenging behaviors.

I ask that you share your thoughts and stories and listen to others' perspectives without judgment. I will keep your identity and comments confidential and ask that you all do the same.

Warm up/share:

1. Name and role? What comes to your mind when you hear the statement "children with challenging behavior"?
    a. I can't thank you enough for being here. Before I start, can I ask you to speak to what motivated you to join the focus group? (share out)

Opening question

2. I'd like to hear about different experiences you have had with children's challenging behavior. *[Prompts for both professional & personal experiences]*

- How prepared or effective do you feel teaching children with challenging behavior?
    - Where did you learn these strategies?
    - Do you feel this is something common among all early learning centers, or unique to your setting?
- Who is impacted by challenging behavior within your classroom?
- Any other experiences you want to share about a child with challenging behavior?

4. What do you believe causes differences in children's behavior?

[give wait time and follow up prompts if needed]

- Why are there differences in children's behavior?
- How do early learning centers respond to challenging behaviors?
- Can you expand on how effective this approach is? [*Explore this question from leadership, teacher, policymaker]*

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about the topic of children's challenging behavior in early education?

What does the field need to continue to do this work?

Appendix D

Interview Informed Consent Form

PURPOSE OF STUDY: The purpose of this research is to speak to a diverse range of preschool teachers to gain an understanding of their perceptions of teaching young children who demonstrate challenging behaviors. The researcher will investigate preschool teachers' understanding of children's challenging behaviors, experiences related to children's challenging behaviors in early education classrooms, and perceived impacts of children's challenging behaviors in early learning centers.

You have been selected with two other preschool teachers to participate in interviews. The discussion of each interview will be audio and visually recorded and transcribed. All identifying information will be removed from the transcript to preserve confidentiality.

RISKS: This research involves minimal risk to participants. Individual responses will not be shared publicly but in aggregated form. Participation is totally voluntary, and participants have the right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time.

BENEFITS: Participating in this study will give early education teachers the opportunity to add their voices and experience to the preliminary research in the field. The study results will be shared with the participants upon request.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Information about participants and their responses will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used; names will not appear on study records; personal information will not appear in any reports or published results. Recorded audio and video will be saved on a password-protected personal computer.

PARTICIPATION: You are being asked to participate in this research because of your experience as a preschool teacher. Your participation is totally voluntary, and you can choose to withdraw from participation at any time. The interview session will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes, interview sessions will be audio and video recorded for transcription purposes. The interviewer is a Lesley University Ph.D. student with knowledge and experience in early education. The interview will be at a time scheduled by the researcher to be mutually convenient for the participants. No special materials or preparation are required of you, the participant.

CONTACT: If you should have any questions regarding your participation in this study, you may contact the Lead Researcher, Elizabeth (Liz) Stapleton, or her Senior Advisor, Patricia Crain de Garlace, EdD.

Elizabeth Stapleton: estaple2@lesley.edu or 508.367.0304
Patricia Crain de Garlace, Ed.D: pcrainde@lesley.edu

There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairpersons at irb@lesley.edu.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

Participant Signature: I, _____ understand the purpose and procedures involved in the proposed research and agree to participate in the study described above.

_____	**_____**
Signature of Participant	**Date of Signature**
_____	**_____**
Elizabeth Stapleton, Lead Researcher	**Date of Signature**

Appendix E

Recruitment Phone Introduction / Email

Dear/Hello _____,

My name is Liz Stapleton, and I am a PhD student at Lesley University. I am starting the research phase of my program, and I am looking for interested preschool teachers to participate in a study about challenging behaviors of young children. The purpose of this research is to gather the insights of preschool teachers regarding children's challenging behavior in early learning centers.

Would you consider adding your voice and participating in my research study? Your participation is solely voluntary. At any point, you can choose to not submit the survey, not volunteer to be part of a focus group discussion or withdraw from participation.

I would be happy to provide additional details about my study and answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,
Liz Stapleton
estaple2@lesley.edu

Appendix F

Teacher and assistant teacher credential requirements in state-funded preschool programs in the US (2020-2021)

State and preschool program(s)	Lead teacher requirements: public schools		Lead teacher requirements: nonpublic schools		Assistant teacher requirement: public schools (CDA or above)	Assistant teacher requirement: nonpublic schools (CDA or above)
	BA or above	ECE specialized training	BA or above	ECE specialized training		
Alabama First Class Pre-K	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Alaska AK Pre-Elementary Programs	✓	✓	✓			
Arizona Quality First Scholarships						
Arkansas Arkansas Better Chance/Arkansas Better Chance for School Success		✓		✓	✓	✓
California*						
CA State Preschool Program (CSPP)		✓		✓		
CA Transitional Kindergarten (TK) Program	✓		NA	NA		NA
Colorado Colorado Preschool Program		✓		✓		
Connecticut*						
CT Child Day Care Contracts (CDCC)	NA	NA		✓	NA	
CT School Readiness (SR)		✓		✓		
CT Smart Start	✓	✓	NA	NA		NA
Delaware DE Early Childhood Assistance Program (ECAP)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
District of Columbia DC Universal Pre-K	✓ (DCPS only)		✓			✓
Florida** FL Voluntary Prekindergarten Program						
Georgia GA's Pre-K Program	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hawaii*						
HI's Executive Office on Early Learning Public Prekindergarten Program	✓	✓	NA	NA	✓	NA
HI State Public Charter School Early Learning Program***		✓	NA	NA	✓	NA
Illinois IL Preschool for All and Preschool Expansion	✓	✓	✓	✓		

State and preschool program(s)	Lead teacher requirements: public schools		Lead teacher requirements: nonpublic schools		Assistant teacher requirement: public schools (CDA or above)	Assistant teacher requirement: nonpublic schools (CDA or above)
	BA or above	ECE specialized training	BA or above	ECE specialized training		
Iowa*						
IA Shared Visions (SV)	✓	✓		✓		
IA Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program (SWVPP)	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Kansas Preschool Offered by Public School Districts	✓		✓			
Kentucky KY Preschool Program	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Louisiana*						
LA 8(g) Student Enhancement Block Grant Program	✓	✓	NA	NA		NA
LA Cecil J. Picard LA 4 Early Childhood Program (LA 4)	✓	✓	NA	NA		NA
LA Nonpublic School Early Childhood Development Program (NSECD)	NA	NA	✓	✓	NA	✓
Maine ME Public Preschool Program	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Maryland MD Prekindergarten Program	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Massachusetts*						
MA Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK)	NA	NA		✓	NA	
MA Chapter 70	✓	✓	NA	NA		NA
Michigan*						
MI Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
MI Developmental Kindergarten (DK)	✓		NA	NA		NA
Minnesota*						
MN Head Start	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
MN Voluntary Prekindergarten and School Readiness Plus (VPK/SRP)						
Mississippi MS Early Learning Collaborative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

State and preschool program(s)	Lead teacher requirements: public schools		Lead teacher requirements: nonpublic schools		Assistant teacher requirement: public schools (CDA or above)	Assistant teacher requirement: nonpublic schools (CDA or above)
	BA or above	ECE specialized training	BA or above	ECE specialized training		
Missouri*						
MO Preschool Program (PP)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
MO Pre-K Foundation Formula (Pre-K FF)	✓	✓	NA	NA	✓	NA
Nebraska NE Early Childhood Education Program	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Nevada NV Ready! State Pre-K***		✓		✓		
New Jersey*						
NJ Preschool Expansion Program (Former Abbott Preschool Program)	✓	✓	✓	✓		
NJ Former Non-Abbott Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA)	✓	✓	✓	✓		
NJ Former Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI)	✓	✓	✓	✓		
New Mexico NM PreK (4s) and NM Early PreK (3s) and NM Mixed Age PreK (3s & 4s)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
New York NY State Administered Prekindergarten Program	✓	✓	✓	✓		
North Carolina NC Pre-Kindergarten Program	✓	✓	✓	✓		
North Dakota ND Early Childhood Education Grant Program	✓		✓			
Ohio OH Early Childhood Education		✓		✓		
Oklahoma OK Early Childhood Four-Year-Old Program	✓	✓	NA	NA		NA
Oregon* OR Pre-Kindergarten (OPK)		✓		✓	✓	✓
OR Preschool Promise		✓		✓		
Pennsylvania* PA Ready to Learn Block Grant (RTL)	✓	✓		✓		

State and preschool program(s)	Lead teacher requirements: public schools		Lead teacher requirements: nonpublic schools		Assistant teacher requirement: public schools (CDA or above)	Assistant teacher requirement: nonpublic schools (CDA or above)
	BA or above	ECE specialized training	BA or above	ECE specialized training		
PA Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP)		✓		✓	✓	✓
PA Kindergarten for Four-Year-Olds and School-Based Pre-K (K4/SBPK)			✓			
PA Pre-K Counts (PKC)	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Rhode Island RI State Prekindergarten Program	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
South Carolina SC Child Early Reading Development and Education Program and EIA/4K	✓	✓		✓		
Tennessee TN Voluntary Pre-K (VPK)	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Texas TX Public School Prekindergarten	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Utah Expanded Student Access to High Quality School Readiness Programs (ESA)						
Vermont VT Universal Prekindergarten Education (Act 166)	✓	✓		✓		
Virginia VA Preschool Initiative	✓	✓		✓		
Washington* Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP)		✓		✓	✓	✓
Washington Transitional Kindergarten (TK)	✓		NA	NA		NA
West Virginia WV Universal Pre-K	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wisconsin WI Four-Year-Old Kindergarten (4K)	✓	✓	✓	✓		

*The state has multiple programs. Each program's requirement is included

**Data are from the 2019–2020 school year

*** Even though a BA is required, there were a large percentage of teachers who did not have a BA or higher at the time of reporting

Note. Retrieved from Weisenfeld, G. G., Hodges, K. S., & Copeman Petig, A. (2023). Qualifications and supports for teaching teams in state-funded preschool in the United States. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, *17*(1), 18. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-023-00122-7

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